

Bring on the awkward squad

Tracey Brown wants fearless MPs

An air of uncertainty has been hanging over the science and policy arena since the election. A new government and a new batch of MPs in parliament had many in the science community frantically counting up the science and engineering degrees among their number, for want of some other way to assess the future prospects for science in policy.

The *Times* and others estimated that there had been a fall in parliamentarians with a scientific training of around 10, from eighty-something to seventy-something. It's not what you would call a wipe-out. So why do many of us have this nagging anxiety that science might have lost?

It is because much more valuable to the cause of sound evidence in public life than the twenty-year old science degrees of MPs is a track record in asking awkward questions. When the last government proposed special regulation for hybrid and chimera embryos, those scientists and politicians who troubled themselves to interrogate the proposals did far more for evidence in policy making than others wielding a third year undergraduate course in histopathology. When a European Directive introduced limits to MRI scans with no scientific foundation, the basis of the policy was challenged by the medically trained MP Evan Harris but it was also pursued as far as Brussels by a Science and Technology Committee under the chairmanship of a former teacher. The champions of good science and evidence are those who will scrutinise and speak out, not necessarily those who know where to put a light emitting diode.

Expediency over evidence

And this is a problem, in parliament, because we lost some fearless and experienced hands in the last election, through retirement and lost seats. This may still be the new government's honeymoon period,

when networking is at a premium and scrutiny isn't, but we all know that ministers, and MPs, will come under the same pressures to disregard evidence for political expediency. We know that on issues like embryo research, genetics and energy, they will encounter misleading claims from campaigns or industry; we know that some research will run into the 'yuk' factor or media frenzies and some politicians will run a mile. So we must wonder who will stand up then and ask the awkward questions or defend research.

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Penalties

There are other things, beyond wanting a peaceful time, that militate against raising awkward questions about the use of evidence in policy. Calling out poor evidence or misleading claims is an uncomfortable business. Individuals who have criticised the arbitrary drug classification system have been deemed irresponsible or even promoters of illicit drugs. Those who have questioned the licensing and prescription of homeopathy have been accused of being in the pay of industry. For politicians such accusations can be incredibly damaging, even disastrous.

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For scientists, raising a critical voice has occasionally led to attacks on research, isolation, lost grants and even libel action.

We need to confront these pressures to stay silent. Scrutinising evidence has got to be encouraged, supported and rewarded sufficiently to make it worth being politically difficult when, inevitably, it will be. The best thing we can do in these post-election months is to see that – in the absence of some established champions of evidence, not some one-time science graduates – we need to set out what scientific evidence is and why we'll make a fuss about it, to all in government and parliament, whether trained in poetry or plumbing.



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