

The Foundation for Science and Technology

Discussion, 27th November, 2007

Speech by Pallab Ghosh, Science Correspondent, BBC News

Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Secretary of State, Sir David

First of all, Mr. Chairman, many thanks for inviting me to speak at the celebration of your 30th anniversary. It has been a privilege to be invited to your talks and I'm especially honoured to be asked to speak here on such an auspicious occasion

I've been asked to respond to Sir David's talk. And in particular I've been asked to give a media perspective on the role of the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor. It's fitting, Mr. Chairman, that you've chosen this topic for your celebration because, for me, *the role of the CSA ought to be the same as that of the Foundation.*

CONSIDERABLE CREDIT

It's to provide independent authoritative advice about scientific issues as they apply to Government policy, and to ensure all Government Departments also have access to similar advice.

It's something that the Foundation has done throughout its 30 years and it's something that you Mr. Chairman and you board deserve considerable credit for – in particular your predecessor Lord Jenkin and your stalwart Chief Executive – Dr Dougal Goodman.

(applause?)

BIT LIKE JOURNALIST

But the CSA's job also involves translating and filtering the technical findings into clear, policy-relevant language rather like a journalist – if you don't mind me saying sir David.

And a bit like a journalist you get to wake up in the mornings and think to yourself – “who's cage am I going to rattle today”? ;-).

But that's where the similarity ends.

The CSA the ‘point man’ for Science. The man in front is often the one with the highest

profile – the one that gets the most plaudits – but also as we’ve seen last month – the one to be first in the firing line.

IMPORTANT ROLE

Sir David – you’ve been one of three fantastic Chief Scientific advisors that I’ve had the great pleasure of working with. I’ve seen how important the role is at close quarters. The job from my perspective involves helping government deal with civil emergencies. And its also to help interpret the constant and sometimes contradictory babble of information the politicians have to deal with.

For an outsider Whitehall seems like a bewildering world. Each department is a complex, well meaning, but often internecine bureaucracy. And the departments’ themselves – as we’ve heard over the past few weeks continue to make critical and avoidable mistakes.

CSA’S PRAYER

The role of a chief scientist is to make sense of the Whitehall clamor.

Margaret Thatcher began her Premiership by quoting from St Francis of Assisi. I’d suggest that it’s also prayer for any Chief Scientific Advisor.

‘Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth? Where there is doubt, may we bring faith?’

So that where there is despair, Ministers and Prime Ministers can bring hope’ ...

THE START

Sir David began his tenure with the backdrop of “Discord”, “error”, “doubt” and ‘despair’.

Following BSE, trust in scientific advice from Government was at an all time low.

Climate Change was still a fringe issue

And the use of scientific advice within government departments was thanks to Sir Bill Stewart and Lord May steadily improving – but still at best *patchy*.

FOOT AND MOUTH

The making of Sir David was his handling of the Foot and Mouth Crisis in 2001. The epidemic was spiraling out of control. But with the help of Lord Krebs he pushed for a policy of contiguous culling. It was politically unpopular – The vets didn't understand it and didn't want it. And Ministers were loathed to see pictures of the Sun being blotted out by the smoke from burning carcasses.

But it was the right thing to do and despite tremendous pressure – he fought for that policy to continue. It was that call that won Sir David the confidence of the Prime Minister – but more importantly the public.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Sir David, though, will perhaps be best remembered for his work in raising the profile of climate change.

If any of you have read Anthony Seldon's biography, Blair Unbound you'd be left with the impression that it was the Prime Minister who convinced the scientific community about the dangers of global warming. Here's his account:

"The scientific community, however, was far from convinced about the threat posed by climate change. To try to bring them round, King suggested to Blair that they initiate a conference at the Meteorological Office's Hadley Centre . Number 10 deliberately stayed at arm's length, and Blair, to remove any suggestion that politics was influencing science, did not he participate. Number 10 were nevertheless delighted by the consensus that emerged: that the world was far more at risk through human-generated climate change than had hitherto been assumed."

Thank Heavens Number 10 stepped in!

GOVT NOT ENGAGED

My own impression is that in 2003 the government actually didn't think that climate change was important. The Brownites were wary of the economic consequences of tackling CO2 emissions. And at the time it seemed that the Blair Camp wanted to take the path of least resistance.

So Sir David did as any dutiful Civil servant would. He wrote the now infamous article in Science magazine where he said that Climate Change posed a greater threat to the World than International Terrorism. No quietly working behind the scenes for him!

WELL DONE, SIR DAVID!

I daresay he got a rollicking. But I'd point to that moment as the moment that Sir David got the Prime Minister's attention on climate change. In my view it was that kick up the backside that started the process that persuaded the Prime Minister to put Climate Change and Africa on top of the Agenda for the Gleneagles Summit in 2005. And It was at that summit that pushed Climate Change Centre Stage internationally.

Personally I believe that there's a very strong case for having one more name on this year's Nobel Peace prize – well done sir David.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

And I think what's been important to me and the public is Sir David's willingness to engage with the media. It makes a huge difference to good accurate reporting if the government's chief scientist can speak to the media and in particular specialist science correspondents *and say it how it is*.

Sir David currently has a great press team and a superb Private Secretary in Michael Evans – but its not always been the case.

NATURAL INSTINCT

The natural instinct among some government press officers and advisors is to suppress information that might be uncomfortable for other parts of Government. But as we've seen recently at the Home Office it stores up trouble for the future.

Secretary of State you may wish to consider giving the new CSA his own press team – so that he can be as independent in his dealings with the media – as he is in giving government independent advice.

CRITICS

To my mind Sir David's chief asset has been his passion. Critics have argued that that this strength is also his weakness.

It's at times they say led to the *blurring of scientific advice and policy advice*. His advocacy for nuclear power being a case in point. Some say that he's overstated the case for action on climate change. And his intervention on badgers being another example.

There's also been concern that much of it has been about personality and celebrity – rather than process and policy. Sir David being the story – rather than the issue at hand.

TOO MUCH POWER

And at a deeper level can there be any such thing as independent scientific advice. When we are talking about the interface of science and policy inevitably the values of the chief scientist and those advising him come into play.

Although Sir David's close relationship with Tony Blair has served us well – particularly in times of crises should we think about reforming “Sofa-Style” science advice?

In which other field would one person have such close unfettered access to the UK's most powerful politician?

COUNTER BALANCE

I have to say – Mr. Chairman – that I recognize these criticisms. But in my experience there are too many committees and stakeholders in Whitehall. Too much cowardice in Whitehall. And dare I say too much watered down consensus in Whitehall.

Sir David has in my opinion been the latest in a long line of CSAs that have been **independent minded** and told Ministers and Prime Ministers *exactly what they thought*. All of them have at times raised inconvenient truths. Sometimes they may have overstepped the mark. But better that – in my view than being yet *another timid cog in the broken Whitehall machine*.

TRUE LEGACY

But I feel Sir David's lasting legacy has been to introduce departmental scientific advisors and to boost their role. The new CSAs along with Sir David have been fighting the quiet battle that the Foundation has been involved in for 30 years: To utilize science to inform policy making for the betterment of society and the planet.

As many of you in government know from bitter experience it can be a frustrating endeavor. Convincing solid scientific arguments can be soaked up like a sponge and lost in the miasma of Whitehall policy making.

COMMON ENDEAVOR

Individuals can make a difference – and head off some of the sillier decisions. And you Sir David have made a big difference!

But as well as celebrating your considerable achievements – I'd suggest that the serious work of this meeting and this Foundation – is how to bed down and build on the structural changes you and your predecessors helped make:

So that science becomes the lifeblood of rational policy making.

This is our common purpose and if we succeed – who knows in the future – we may not have to rely on great Chief Scientific Advisors.