

The DBT was set up in 1986 to advise the Folketinget, the Danish parliament, but its work is not confined to Denmark. In 2009, for example, it carried out the most extensive study to date of how communication affects global public attitudes towards climate change, covering 4,000 citizens in 38 countries. Unlike simple opinion polls, the World Wide Views on Global Warming project gave participants extensive information on the science and economics of climate change (see www.wwviews.org). As the meetings progressed, widespread scepticism and doubt gave way to a high degree of consensus that climate change is real and should be dealt with promptly.

The DBT is currently assessing a range of other topics, including the sustainability of the Danish transport system, the risks related to synthetic biology, and the security of delivering government services using new information and communication technologies. On the international level, it is set to produce a policy report, World Wide Views on Biodiversity, for next year's Rio+20 summit on biodiversity in India.

That project and most ongoing assessments will perish if the board is dismantled. The governing coalition of three centre-left parties formed after the parliamentary elections in September intends to redirect the board's annual funding of about 10 million kroner (US\$1.8 million) to the 2012 research and education budget, which it is determined to spare from savage cuts. In times of financial crisis, such a stance deserves applause — but the impact on Danish society and government of the loss of competence in technology assessment and public engagement in science would far outweigh the benefits

to students and researchers of the modest sum gleaned from closing the DBT.

Many other countries take inspiration from Denmark on how to study and shape public attitudes towards the science that could help society address issues such as ageing, climate, energy and biodiversity. The DBT is leading a €5.4-million (US\$7.2-million) European Union-funded project, called PACITA, to expand technology assessment based on public engagement (see www.pacitaproject.eu). Denmark's approach is also gaining a following in Asia, where demand for sustainable energy technology is growing rapidly. Policy-makers in China and South Korea, for example, are increasingly open to the participatory methods for technology assessment pioneered by Denmark.

Clearly, then, the DBT should be saved. A way forward might be for it to apply its analytical services more widely to international assessments, such as the biodiversity exercise it is currently engaged in. Domestically, it should serve all decision-makers, from municipal to national levels, rather than just parliament. Taking on more externally funded projects could help to compensate for unavoidable budget cuts.

Meanwhile, scientists and science academies in Denmark and abroad should voice their support for a democratic institution that has served science better than its small size and modest title might lead one to believe. Danish MPs and the government's young science minister, Morten Østergaard, should take note. ■

“The Danish government risks destroying a critical piece of the science-policy system.”

A poor sequel

Muted media response to the release of more climate e-mails shows science's strength.

In an interview with *Nature* about 12 months ago, to mark the first anniversary of the release of hacked e-mails in an incident now widely referred to as Climategate, climate scientist Phil Jones said he feared that the anonymous hackers were sitting on more material, and that they would release it. He also said, having been through the experience already, that if there were to be a repeat then he was confident he would deal with it much better second time around. Last week he was proved correct, on both counts.

In marked contrast to the original 2009 release, Jones and his employer, the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK, this time responded rapidly and with a keen sense of what the media were going to be interested in. This was never a story about the integrity of climate science, but rather about the behaviour of those scientists whose e-mails painted an incomplete but troubling self-portrait. The absence of the chief protagonist last time around only fuelled the flames.

Within 24 hours of the second batch of e-mails being handed to climate-sceptic websites, Jones was in central London answering questions at a press conference. And the university made widely available its explanations of some of the excerpted messages doing the rounds on the blogosphere. The reasons for this change in approach range from the practical — the original Climategate broke on a Friday, whereas the sequel arrived on a Tuesday — to the personal — Jones was shaken badly in 2009 and in no state to face the press. There is also a generous dollop of hindsight. For almost two years, those involved have had to listen to criticism of how they handled Climategate and how they should have done it differently. Last week they were able to show that they have learned from their mistakes.

Still, the swift response from Jones and his university cannot alone explain the relative indifference with which the new batch of e-mails — Climategate 2 — has been met by the wider world.

Much of the media frenzy over the e-mail release in 2009 was prompted by the high political profile of climate change at the time. Nations were preparing for the heavily hyped and ill-fated Copenhagen summit, and soon afterwards a blunder in an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report about melting Himalayan glaciers added to the sense of climate science not being what it seemed. Climategate 2 came just ahead of the latest round of United Nations climate talks in Durban, South Africa, but that meeting is lower profile. It is harder to draw attention when fewer eyes are on the subject.

There is also the sense that many in the media felt cheated by the original Climategate. They were led by the nose, by those with a clear agenda, to a sizzling scandal that steadily defused as the true facts and context were made clear. Many will not make the same mistake — to write headlines first and ask questions later — again. Plus, it is hard for anyone except the most committed conspiracy theorist to see much of interest in the content of the released e-mails, even taken out of context.

None of the independent investigations that followed the 2009 release found any hints of scientific misconduct. Critics won't find any in the new batch either — the animated discussions that the highlighted e-mails do include, not shy of strong personal opinions and the occasionally harsh judgement concerning the quality of this or that piece of work, never really stray from sound normal science.

Climategate did no lasting damage to science. In fact, it can be argued that the incident fostered climatology and improved the way the field is perceived by the general public. The anonymous onslaught — illegal and grossly low, to be sure — has forced scientists to speak more openly about the gaps, difficulties and uncertainties that they are facing. On a more general note, it served to remind scientists, and hopefully legitimate critics as well, that respect, honesty and politeness are essential qualities in any intellectual endeavour.

If anything, Climategate 2 may damage the cause of the climate sceptics who eagerly promote it. Despite their obvious lack of anything approaching credible evidence, their hyperbole, accusations, claims and allegations remain the same. Beyond the echo chamber they inhabit, who is still listening? You cannot, as Abraham Lincoln said, fool all of the people all of the time. And it is getting harder to fool them some of the time too. ■

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