

November 2010

Written evidence from Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) to the House of Commons Public Administration Committee Inquiry into 'Smaller Government: Shrinking the Quango State'

Introduction

1. The Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) is an independent advocacy group which campaigns for the scientific and engineering health of the UK. We are funded by hundreds of individuals and over 80 organisations in the science and engineering sector. We focus on the importance of science and evidence in government, public funding for research, private-sector research and development, and science, technology, engineering, and maths education.
2. Independent scientific advice is a vital tool for government. In an increasingly complex world, where science and technology play more and more central roles, concepts such as 'risk' and 'harm' are best assessed by experts. This is true of a range of policy areas-from health to defence, transport to agriculture.
3. Government may well need to bear in mind a range of considerations when making policy, such as public opinion, cost, or manifesto promises. But good scientific advice is essential for understanding the possible impacts of policies. When decided policy conflicts with scientific advice, it should be clear and transparent to the public what the advice nevertheless was, and that other considerations were prioritised-as it is a government's right to do.
4. The BSE crisis is often cited as an example of poor interaction between scientific advice and politics. Without scientific analysis, we may never have known the human impact of the disease. If we had the analysis sooner, lives and money may have been saved. Interpretation of such risk must be done professionally.
5. The episode also highlighted the importance of such advice being politically independent. There may be occasions when scientific advice is politically unwelcome, such as when it contradicts government policy or statements.

Scientific Advisory Committees

6. The Government has an extensive network of bodies, known as Scientific Advisory Committees (SACs), which provide advice. Examples of these are the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management, the Advisory Group on Hepatitis, the Advisory Group on Microbiological Safety of Food, and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD).
7. Members of SACs are not employed. They are usually eminent researchers or other figures who have extensive experience of their field and choose to give their time and expertise for the good of public policy while, in parallel, pursuing their private or public careers.

8. SACs are supported and facilitated by a secretariat. The activity and role of SACs is governed by the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees (CoPSAC). The Government Office for Science has recently launched a consultation as part of its updating of CoPSAC. Individual SACs may, in addition to CoPSAC, have their own Codes of Practice.

Independence

9. The role of SACs was highlighted by the events of November 2009, when Professor David Nutt was asked by the Home Secretary to resign from his post as Chair of the ACMD. The resulting controversy was not primarily about the quality or otherwise of Prof Nutt's work, but over whether it was appropriate for a minister to publicly attack and dismiss an independent scientific adviser.

10. Many scientists, including those who may have disagreed with Prof Nutt's assessment, were concerned that the dismissal could set a precedent. If expert advisers can be dismissed on the basis of their advice, then their independence is undermined. They and their colleagues may feel pressured to say what politicians want them to say, not follow potentially damaging lines of inquiry, or be more or less forthright than they otherwise would be in their statements. Independent-minded experts may be less willing to serve on SACs, potentially harming the quality of advice available to government.

11. In response, the Campaign for Science and Engineering and Sense About Science, in concert with leading scientists, drafted a new document: 'The Principles for the Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice'. It was endorsed by a large number of former or current scientific advisors, and their names are available here: <http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/421>. An altered version of the Principles was eventually incorporated into the Ministerial Code earlier this year.

Implications of NDPB reform

12. A number of SACs are being abolished, reformed, or reconstituted. These include the Expert Advisory Group on AIDS and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisations, which are being reconstituted as a Department of Health/Public Health Service committee of experts.

13. Many SACs are being retained. There are three classes of justification given for such retention.

- Retention on grounds of performing a technical function (e.g. Animal Procedures Committee)
- Retention on grounds of performing a technical function which should remain independent of government (e.g. Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs)
- Retention on grounds of impartiality (e.g. Administration of Radioactive Substances Advisory Committee)

14. It is not clear what distinguishes these classes of committee from each other, or from committees which are being reconstituted. The Government should clarify both of these points, or risk an inference that committees which are reconstituted will not be required to be as impartial, independent, or technically competent as they formerly were-or as

committees which are being retained in full on such grounds. It should also clarify the decision process by which these decisions are being made, and who is accountable for them.

15. The further issue of whether CoPSAC and The Principles for the Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice apply to reconstituted committees also needs to be addressed. This may partly be done through the ongoing consultation on CoPSAC. Discrepancies in how CoPSAC and The Principles apply to different SACs may create a multi-tier system of independence for expert advisers, which could damage independence as well as confidence in the system.

16. However, there may indeed need to be additional regulations in place for any SACs which become internal departmental bodies, as these committees are more at risk of informal political pressure from their host departments (this highlights the benefit of them having previously been NDPBs). The Government should consult carefully with the scientific community and the Chief Scientist over how it can ensure the actual and perceived independence of these bodies is above reproach. It is vital that the public sees independent advice from SACs as being truly impartial in order to achieve continuing trust and acceptance of such advice.

17. Some SACs have responsibilities to more than one department or government minister. If a SAC is being reconstituted inside a single department, it is important its access and lines of communication to other departments remain open and available.