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Viewpoint

Crisis of confidence

Does physics face a crisis of public confidence ? Can equilibria in science policy be achieved ? How can physicists become more effective in research and development ? The Advisory Committee on Physics and Society has tackled these complex questions, and their conclusions are published in this issue. 'Improved communications with society ; a shift in emphasis towards society's problems ; more relevant organization and training' sum up the findings.

As the basis for discussion at a special session of the EPS General Conference in Wiesbaden on 3 October, the 'Physics and Society' paper should lead to many questions.

It would seem desirable to strengthen the recommendations with more explicit evidence in support of them. In stating that there were 'an almost bewildering number of facets of the subject "Science and Society", the Advisory Committee were fully aware that the subject of the interaction between physics, on one side, and social, economic and political forces, on the other, is very complex indeed. For the time being, EPS has no choice but to proceed on the basis of incomplete understanding and is now faced with the difficult task of persuading physicists that the recommendations in the paper will be effective. EPS must start somewhere, and the 'Physics and Society' paper is a beginning.

However, thorough, empirically-based studies are needed to establish the relationship between physics and social, economic and political systems. Amongst the useful results would be clear explanations of how science policies are formulated in different countries. These studies would require significant efforts, but once physicists had the results they might be better prepared to face crises of confidence.

Physics and Society - public policy and current prospects

Report by the Advisory Committee on Physics and Society

The Interrelation between Science and Society - particularly Communication between Physics and Society

The Committee observe that society-at-large holds science responsible for many of society's current problems and that public opinion fears that even worse may follow in the wake of further scientific advances. Scientists have been accused of remoteness from reality and of being concerned only with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, irrelevant to the world around them.

The Committee note, on the other hand and despite their apprehension, that the public recognize that modern life allows no alternative to an ultimate accommodation with science. They have no wish to abandon the material conveniences that science and technology have contributed to their daily lives ; they basically accept science as valuable to society and that there must be a permanent interrelationship.

The above-mentioned fears and charges by society are frequently expressed in statements of the following kind :

> Humanity is threatened by the vanity of those who believe that only good can come from satisfying scientific creativity.
>
> Too many scientists show only minimal interest in the uses of scientific knowledge and their consequences.
>
> Scientists prefer to be masters of highly specialized facts and to proclaim their over-riding importance, rather than to illuminate commonly shared truth.
>
> Academic scientists are detached from the harsh world in which we live and offer little or no contribution to vital problems confronting ordinary citizens.
>
> Scientists can be regarded as being, at best, curiously naive and, at worst, absent-minded professors ; they are single minded and as if not wholly complete in humanity and common sense.

The Committee believe that there is an urgent need to respond to such fears and charges.

Vice versa, non-scientists and society often are not fully aware of how much they owe to science and technology and to what extent our 'quality of life' depends on the results of scientific R & D. Transportation and communication, medical care, energy supply and other fields provide numerous examples. These tremendous services of R & D to society should be communicated to people outside science. Particular attention should be paid to this in education policies and curricula.

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