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A Very Human Business

In the kinetic behavior of AAAS over the past decade, not excluding the present, social controversy has troubled the waters and provoked questions about what is science's proper business and what is not. While the prevailing wisdom is that the fires of American discontent are burnt out, the evidence is that it does not take much to rekindle them. Science may yearn to be seen as impartial, a sanctuary of reconciliation whose members hear no evil, see none, and above all speak none. If scientists were saints, it might be so.

At the recent AAAS Annual Meeting the principal eruption was one of information and communication, with nearly 140 symposia and almost 1000 speakers shoehorned into five days and nights. But there were other eruptions too, more impassioned and divisive, whose echoes still resound. The questions will not be quieted. What pushes scientists, whatever their fields and credentials, to plunge into social and political controversies which are not central to the search for and application of knowledge? What is politics doing in the house of science?

There is no way, in a dynamic society, that a strict line can be drawn between science and the tides of social change. They overlap, and if it is argued that science is value-free the same cannot be said of scientists. If scientific freedom is half the operative equation, responsibility is the other half. Where trouble comes is in divining the issues on which scientists should take a stand, and in attesting the legitimacy of their interventions. There are no glib rules, no magisterial fiats, to go by. Conscience and conviction are among the valuables rescued from the debris of the recent American experience, and they will have to do.

The scientific community has seldom complained when politics has used science for its various purposes, and it is curious that so much anguish is expressed when it is the scientists' turn to make use of politics. The glorious Apollo program, for all its benefits, was more the child of politics than of the craving for exploration. The war on cancer had similar origins. The sweep-stake staged for siting the solar energy laboratories was more of the same. Like it or not, political motives have been largely responsible for driving American science and technology for three decades, and under the banner of energy they are likely to do so for the next three. It is outright myth to imagine that science and politics exist in separate spheres.

It is not a matter of indifference that in police states the human rights of fellow scientists are violated. Nor is it beneath scientists to borrow textbook political methods in the defense of basic research against statutory regulation. When state governments dictate what is to be taught in the schools about the origins of life, we have little hesitation in taking up the fight. If these responses are legitimate, it is not clear why scientists should not also go to the mat for the physically handicapped in science, for the rights of other minority groups, or on behalf of an equal chance for women in science. The advancement of science will not be measured entirely by the growth of research budgets or the per capita share of Nobel Prizes.

If there is a hitch in the argument, it concerns the public's grasp of what the scientists are up to. Will a public which listens when scientists speak on saccharin or laetrile care to hear their views on social morality? The reaction is likely to be that the scientists have left their domain. Where the public will finally lose patience is at the appearance of arrogance, no matter what may be the moral strength of the scientists' position. It is here that a line surely can be drawn.

Science and social controversy will touch each other more often than not, and usually with good reason. AAAS will get its share. But when the sparks fly again, as they are bound to, there is a lot to be said for the view of our colleagues in London,* that science is "a very human business."

—WILLIAM D. CAREY

*"The vulnerable side of science," *Nature*, 15 December 1977, page 549 (editorial).