

# When Science and Politics Don't Mix

**S**cience often finds itself intertwined with politics. Sometimes that is because science has important consequences for society and thus generates strong partisan disagreement, as in the contemporary international debates over stem cells and cloning. At other times, it happens because political movements seek support from scientific arguments and recruit experts to make them. These entanglements, although not always welcome, are an inevitable consequence of the fact that science matters.

Occasionally though, scientists drag politics into science by the heels, rather than the other way around. That's what's happening now, as a largely European movement urges a scientific boycott to punish Israel for its recent military actions against Palestinian cities in the West Bank. Academic boycotts, of course, are not new: Many U.S. and European professors, including scientists, declined to visit institutions and colleagues in South Africa in the 1980s to protest against apartheid. Whether that was preferable to continued scientific engagement is doubtful, but the question of whether to visit a nation or to decline out of one's political convictions is plainly a matter on which an individual is free to follow his or her conscience.

But some of the practices now emerging are quite different and deserve careful attention from the scientific community. In a case recently brought to *Science's* attention, an Israeli researcher asked an author of papers in two peer-reviewed journals to supply cells from a clone used in expression analyses. The author declined, citing her institution's protests against the recent Israeli military actions. It was a particularly ironic refusal, because the research being conducted by the group in Israel involves a collaboration with Palestinian scientists that is aimed quite directly at benefiting Palestinians.

The author's refusal is a clear violation of the policies in place at most journals and commonly understood in the scientific community. When authors submit a manuscript, they make a commitment to supply cells, special reagents, or other materials necessary for verification. They are not free to violate that commitment once their paper has been published. *Science's* Instructions to Contributors set out the rule this way: "Any reasonable request for materials and methods necessary to verify the conclusions of the experiments reported must be honored." On occasion, we have had to encourage compliance by interceding with authors on behalf of persons requesting materials.

After the Israeli scientist was refused the clone by the author, he contacted the editors of both journals in which the paper had appeared. One didn't reply; the other contacted the publisher, Ken Plaxton at Elsevier. Plaxton replied: "We do not have, nor wish to have, any influence on personal decisions made by contributors to our journals and cannot, I am afraid, in this instance help you further." That, it seems to us, is an inadequate response.

The refusenik's rationale has two parts. First it says, in effect, that the government of Israel has committed a morally repugnant act; part two asserts that this justifies the cancellation of an obligation to the entire scientific community. The first claim would be sure to stir up vigorous debate in most places; but we don't need to get into that, because the second part is so unimpressive. Its essential claim is that one's personal political convictions trump all other commitments and values. We've heard that before, and we don't buy it.

As we have reported from time to time, a National Research Council committee is currently studying rules governing access to data and materials. At a workshop in February, the standard for sharing these received strong endorsement; indeed, it may be extended to materials requested for further work, not merely for verification. *Science*, believing that the consensus on this issue is firm, will continue to insist that authors have an obligation to share material—cell lines, knockout mice, reagents, etc.—with readers who request them, unless such transfers are prohibited by laws or regulations, such as those designed to deter bioterrorism. We will continue to intercede with authors who refuse: first with persuasion and then, if necessary, by imposing penalties relating to future publication.

Perhaps there are plausible excuses for failure to comply with the sharing requirement, like "We ran out," or "The dog ate my culture." But "We don't like your government" just won't do.

**Donald Kennedy**

**Personal political  
convictions  
do not trump  
authors' obligation  
to share  
experimental  
material**