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We need to talk

by Freddie Theodoulou, Science Editor



"Wise men don't need advice. Fools won't take it."
Benjamin Franklin

If you've already flicked through this month's magazine, you could be forgiven for wondering why we haven't covered the implications for science if the UK leaves the European Union following June's referendum. In fact, we had a couple of nice pieces lined up on Brexit but have decided not to run them for legal reasons. The Charity Commission recently reaffirmed its strict guidelines regarding involvement in political matters such as elections and referenda to the effect that "Charities should not engage in political activity in connection with the EU referendum unless... [they are] satisfied that such activity is a proper way to support the delivery of the charity's purposes and is in the best interests of the charity". Needless to say, the Biochemical Society takes its charitable status very seriously, so, whilst we plan to bring you a summary of members' views, we have decided to err on the side of caution and refrain from publishing our writers' personal opinions on this occasion.

Having an opinion is one thing, but giving evidence another. Although we're tiptoeing around Brexit in this month's Biochemist, I feel compelled to bring your attention to a very worrying piece of proposed anti-lobbying legislation. The UK Cabinet Office has decreed that, from May this year, grant money issuing directly or indirectly from government cannot be used to "support activity intended to influence or attempt to influence Parliament, government or political parties... or attempting to influence legislative action". It is not yet clear whether this condition will apply to university funding and science grants, but should this prove to be the case, the implications are far-reaching and the Biochemical Society has co-signed the Royal Society of Biology's letter of concern to the Cabinet Office. Whilst the clause was ostensibly intended to stop government-funded bodies lobbying for more money, it could effectively prevent government-funded scientists from participating in political debate and deny policy makers access to a wealth of expertise. Does it make sense to ignore the voice of researchers on issues such as biomedical ethics, climate change, pesticide usage and antibiotic resistance? This is completely baffling to anyone who has embraced the government-funded research councils' current impact agenda. "Guess this means RCUK grant applications will need a Lack of Impact Statement in the future..." drily tweeted one bemused researcher.

As we go to press, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee is compiling a report on the relationship between EU membership and UK science. Ironically, seven government-funded research institutions, nine universities, numerous learned societies and a whole host of individual academics have given evidence to the enquiry. Can we imagine that it would be wise to prevent this? As scientists, we have a moral duty to speak out about the implications of our work and contribute to evidence-based policymaking. As usual, someone with a better mind than me expressed this somewhat more eloquently:

"Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties."
John Milton, Areopagitica 1644 ■

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