

# Anyone Advising Advisors?

## *Scientists at the policy interface*

### Key messages

- Instead of focusing on leaders not following advice we must examine their advisors' approach.
- Advisors would benefit from seeing their role as constantly evolving to better serve society.
- Growth and development of the field require research into the learning process of advisors.

During the height of the Brexit debate, prominent English politician, Michael Gove, admitted to a journalist that “we have had enough of experts.” These comments sent shockwaves through the scientific community around the world. It seemed quite out of character for the United Kingdom, proud birthplace of everything from tennis to the laws of classical mechanics much beloved of physicists, to be home to such attitudes. This was by no means an isolated incident. Amongst the many lessons learnt during the ongoing pandemic is the extent to which some politicians will ignore scientific advice, even if it causes the death of their own countries' citizens. One could argue that the fault lies squarely with the politicians. It is perhaps more fruitful, though, to shine the spotlight on the advisors themselves.

Human society is, in many ways, the individual writ large. Nutrition, hygiene, waste disposal, and even interpersonal communication – the necessities that drive a human being are the same ones that plague communities around the world. What is less appreciated is that the very advice being dispensed by those scholars who lie at the boundary between the scientific and political worlds very often applies to themselves. Let us look at the ongoing climate emergency. One often hears of the need to transform the way we live so that our societies may become more sustainable in the long term. The classical answer to how this transformation should come about is education. In learning about the planet and their place in it, the logic goes, citizens will come to appreciate the need to proactively protect it. Rather curiously, however, there is little systematic understanding of the processes these same scholars use to look inwards and understand how the mechanisms of science advice must continuously evolve to better serve the societies that they are embedded in. This subtle change in perspective reframes the role of scholars who advice policy makers; instead of being merely learned individuals who use their expertise to give advice they become advisors are continuously learning. We are thus pushed to examine the entire edifice that supports the interface between science and policymaking. What should institutions and funding agencies focus on? How should the next generation of science advisors be trained?

Formal mechanisms for science advice to policymakers are relatively recent additions to the institutions that govern many countries. It may therefore not come as a surprise that science advisors often learn on the job and have little systematic backing to help them perform their duties well. The time is ripe, to formally initiate research programmes that study policy advice. Individual advisors' experiences and anecdotes should be analysed and distilled to yield both warning signs that other advisors would do well to look out for as well as best practices to emulate. Undertaking such a research programme would also allow funding agencies to quantify the impact of their research on policymaking. It is by studying science advice systematically that our societies can capitalise on the experience of present and past advisors. ■

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