

We Need an Informed Conscience

Efforts of science to develop and express a conscience are distressing in their ineffectiveness. Publications like *Scientist and Citizen* and *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* come on the scene, change names and wander without the influence one might want for them. Campaigns for the Schwartz amendment and moving away from Chicago generate much heat but not much light or permanent change. Organizations like Scientists for Social and Political Action follow the Federation of American Scientists with no obvious difference.

In Washington the American Physical Society fills a large hall with persons talking and learning about the antiballistic-missile question (*PHYSICS TODAY*, July, page 99). Meanwhile the organization is without procedures to discover or discuss a hundred or a thousand other matters that involve both physics and public policy: support of science, weapons systems, open access to laboratories, international exchange of persons and information, job opportunities.

The cause of ineffectiveness, as we see it, is the dilemma between commitment and strength. On the one hand activists seek association with those who believe as they do. Their societies welcome believers but not the opposition. But existence of an issue implies significant difference of opinion: no difference, no issue. If one issue divides a group in half and another reduces the population by another 25% and so on, a group dealing with several important issues is likely to be small.

Yet all movements need the strength of numbers, and numbers are most readily available when the purpose is information, not commitment, and all are welcome. A good example is the Washington ABM session, billed as an information exchange and prevented from becoming a free-for-all forum for controversy.

How does one solve this dilemma between intense commitment and widely distributed information?

One solution has been to look to organized groups like the American Physical Society. Logically enough, believers in certain causes have sought to put society numbers and prestige on record as favoring their view.

But the movement runs into two kinds of difficulty. One is that many members are not on the "right" side of an issue. The second is the resistance of members who argue that the society was formed for a nonpolitical purpose. Taking on other purposes is not a proper extension of the mission, no matter how worthy the purposes, they say. If the mission changes from scientific to political, say the most vehement of this group, they will leave the organization.

Our answer to the situation would be to recognize the two sides of the dilemma and deal with one at a time. Commitment may be outside the purview of the American Institute of Physics and its member societies. As administrators and their advisers see it, constitutions, charters and requirements for tax-exempt status prevent that kind of involvement. If stands are to be taken, societies and groups of other kinds should take them.

Information, though, is another matter. The first mission of a scientist, we think, is to inform himself and others. Within the various scientific societies or even in a separate society formed for the purpose should be councils, meetings and publications especially for discussion of public-policy questions and determinations of which ones to discuss. The goal should be open-mindedness and information, not commitment.

One group has suggested an APS division (*PHYSICS TODAY*, June, page 15). Properly constrained to stay within APS bounds, such a division might be the appropriate mechanism. Let us all hope that the APS Council, which is studying the matter, will actively pursue the whole subject. The pressure of the need is more important than the mechanism chosen to meet it.

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