

A Bioethics Commission for the UK: A Proposal

Under the present system we have specific new committees, working parties, enquiries and now commissions appointed whenever there is a new alarm. The rate of new “alarms” is increasing and we have just had two new commissions announced to deal with two specific aspects of Genetic Modification – the bioethical flavour of the month.

But:-

1. There is no dedicated Foresight capacity, on constant readiness, scanning the research and industrial fields and able to consider possible ethical issues before they arise, and wherever they may arise, which all too often leave Government on the back foot.
2. Thus each time a new body is set up a new start has to be made with a new group of individuals (or the same ones wearing different hats) on a new learning curve, with consequent delays in assembling the right team to deal with what can rapidly become an inflamed topic.
3. The narrow remit of each enquiry can result in the isolation of experts in different topics which may well be interconnected.
4. There is not, and cannot develop, a dedicated infrastructure of staff to serve Ministers, Parliament, the Research Councils, the scientific communities, and industry with fully up-to-date information.
5. There is repetition of effort in covering ground some of which is common to successive enquiries. An identifiable – though not static – national bioethos would develop almost as a by-product, which would help research, industry, and public know more or less where they stand.

In this situation, three conspicuous and unwelcome trends have developed since I put forward a proposal for a National Bioethics Commission two years ago:

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Statements by Industry are simply disbelieved by the public.

Government is not believed either.

and

The NGOs enjoy greater credence than either Government (including government scientists) or industry.

At present, the better informed the public is, the less trust it puts in reassurances from industries and regulators, who over the last few years, alongside magnificent benefits, and however unintentionally, have given us Strontium 90 and pesticides in human milk, thalidomide, aids- and herpes-infected blood in transfusions, BSE, dioxides in chicken and eggs, and now perhaps genetically-modified pollen to get hay fever from.

Public scepticism is rational in face of the evidence; it is counterproductive to dismiss it as “hysterical”. Nor are the claims of Free Trade recognised as dwelling on a higher ethical plane than natural scepticism.

So satisfactory progress in biotechnology now depends on the restoration of public trust, and that can only be by way of the provision to the public of unimpeachable evidence and clear and humane argument based on it..

The role of a National Bioethics Commission – preferably a Royal Commission, with the authority to send for witnesses – would be to produce credible, because unimpeachable, information, analysis and advice for Government, Parliament and society, and do this by bringing together, permanently, the diverse talents and specialisms which at present are available (insofar as they are available at all) only in isolated cells. Such an arrangement would also put an end to the potentially infinite need for a new enquiry to be set up every time a new problem, or the need to revisit an old one, heaves over the horizon.

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The body's responsibility would be to provide the essential conspectus and continuity, through permanent membership, expert secretariat, and an information infrastructure; to develop rapport with interested sectors: research councils, Royal Colleges, bio-science, biotechnology, and medicine, relevant academe in general, at home and abroad; and to inform and consult the public. It would no doubt operate partly through subject committees, which would provide continuity with parts of the present scene.

It would also provide the Government with an experienced, permanent and easy-to-find point of contact for the many relevant international organisations and the National Bioethics Councils which most developed (and many less developed countries) now have, so as to deal with the impacts of technological progress beyond our borders and to exchange knowledge and benefits with the rest of humanity.

Everything recommended above, and much else (particularly the building-in of democratic opinion-sounding) has been tried out in one country or another.