The Real Debate

WE IN THE UNITED STATES ARE SLIDING DOWN A RAMP THAT WILL TAKE US, IN JUST 4 DAYS, to the much anticipated “Super Tuesday” in the presidential nomination cycle, when voters in over 20 states participate in preliminary elections to select their favorite candidate. I have prepared for this by watching, in alternating stages of boredom and disbelief, the numerous “debates” staged by the creative powers who run television. I wonder whether the same sensations haven’t affected our scientific colleagues in other nations, where leadership is decided in an atmosphere that is, well, a bit more stately. Here it may be too late to change anyone’s mind about their vote on 5 February, but perhaps between now and the culminating summer conventions that will announce the final party candidates, we can have a debate focusing on the candidates’ views about science and technology.

I disclaim any intellectual property rights to this idea; probably most of you have already thought of it. My News colleagues at Science have already examined the candidates’ records and statements (4 January 2008 issue). But a public debate on science could launch disagreements among the candidates and sharpen positions. Chris Mooney and Shawn Otto have organized a group of concerned scientists, journalists, and leaders of government, nongovernment, and business institutions to push for that (www.science debate2008.org). The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the publisher of Science, has agreed to cosponsor the debate, and the project has been endorsed by Congressman Bart Gordon (D-TN), chair of the House Science and Technology Committee. In a different but related effort, Research!America invites voters, through a multi-state ad campaign, to contact the candidates and urges the candidates to get out their positions on health and research (www.yourcandidatesyourhealth.org). And Student Pugwash USA and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology are making similar plans.

If we had a science debate among the party candidates, who else might be involved? There are several good science journalists who could moderate (I won’t name them because it would make me more enemies than friends). We could pick a scientist as well, but an alternative might be a public figure with a serious interest in science and science policy—someone along the lines of Alan Alda, perhaps? And it would have to be televised. I hope we’d enlist an organization whose style more closely resembles that of the Public Broadcasting Service’s NewsHour rather than the YouTube/Cable News Network combination.

Finally, we’d need some questions. In an appearance on National Public Radio’s Science Friday (11 January), Shawn Otto urged scientists to submit questions. Here are some of theirs and some of mine:

• What consideration should be given to political affiliation in the appointment of members of advisory committees whose role is to evaluate research quality?
• The president has a Science Adviser who also heads the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). What attributes would you seek in your Science Adviser, and what kinds of issues would you bring to OSTP?
• What balance would you seek in federal science funding between major-program project research and investigator-initiated basic research grants?
• The budget of the National Institutes of Health was doubled but has decreased for 3 years because its appropriations have been in constant dollars. Would your Administration propose adding inflation costs to that budget in future years?
• If a threatened species exists on private land, does the Endangered Species Act require certain duties of the landowner? What are these, and would you favor changes in the law to alter them?
• In view of public concerns about global warming, are you committed to the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions? Would you choose a cap-and-trade program or a carbon tax? Why?
• Would you make a commitment to ensure public access to findings made by government scientists in the course of exercising their agency responsibilities?
• Crops derived from recombinant DNA technology are in increasing use in agriculture. Do you favor more intensive regulation to eliminate their possible interference with surrounding natural ecosystems?

In case we can bring this thing off, get your questions ready!

– Donald Kennedy
Editor's Summary

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