

A consensus conference from the point of view of a lay-panel member

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My experience of the United Kingdom National Consensus Conference on Plant Biotechnology (UKNCC, November 1994) started with an advertisement in my local paper (Figure 1) which said 'Volunteers wanted! Would you like to discover more about a rapidly developing area of science that will affect us all; debate its benefits and risks with experts; and make recommendations for its future?' This sounded like an interesting diversion from my work as an operations manager with a national bank, so, after checking the dates, I sent off my application. I am interested in a broad range of subjects outside my working environment. I have a growing family (two daughters aged 12 and 15, and a son aged 7) and there is never a shortage of questions to be answered, especially where school homework is concerned. One reason for my initial interest was that the conference topic, plant biotechnology, is something that is likely to have great implications for my children over the next few years. The second major attraction was that it was a subject totally unconnected with anything else I had undertaken and radically different from my day-to-day work. It offered a challenge; something to stretch and develop my mental capacity, and to improve my interpersonal and, as it turned out, my leadership skills. On 20 July I received a letter telling me that I was one of the lucky applicants to be selected to serve on the lay panel.

The first preparatory weekend

As I travelled to Oxford on 2 September for the first preparatory weekend, I remember wondering what the other panel members would be like, and, perhaps more importantly, what it was we were going to be doing. We introduced ourselves over a very pleasant dinner in the college where we were staying; eight men and eight women aged between 18 and about 65 all with a common interest in contributing to a subject that, perhaps in a short space of time, is going to affect every man, woman and child, wherever they live. It is important to mention that the location for the first preparatory

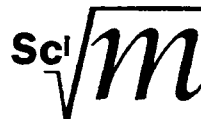
VOLUNTEERS **WANTED!**

Would you like to discover more about a rapidly developing area of science that will affect us all; debate its benefits and risks with experts; and make recommendations for its future?

For the first time in the UK, a panel of 16 members of the public is to be consulted about new ways of using plants in agriculture, food, industry and medicine. Those appointed will learn about the subject in two briefing weekends in Oxford (2-4 September and 7-9 October 1994); confront experts before a public audience in London (2-4 November 1994); and publish a report to be widely circulated about developments in this field.

If you wish to apply, you must be able to attend all of these dates and be aged 18 or over. You must have no previous connection with plant biotechnology. You do not need to know anything about this subject to begin with. Participants' expenses will be met.

Are you interested? Write a brief letter (one page) about yourself and why you want to be considered for selection by Friday 24 June 1994 to:
Imelda Topping, Project Manager,
UK National Consensus Conference on Plant
Biotechnology, Science Museum,
London SW7 5NH.
Tel: 071-938 8241; Fax: 071-938 8213.



SCIENCE MUSEUM
LONDON

Figure 1. Advertisement for volunteers for the first UK National Consensus Conference on Plant Biotechnology.

weekend in Oxford and the second weekend in Abingdon were both, in my opinion, crucial to the success of the whole exercise. We were in very pleasant surroundings, being well looked after and, as a result, able to concentrate on our task.

The weekend passed in something of a blur: we learnt about genetic engineering, DNA, enzymes, biodiversity and the rest of what seemed like a dictionary of jargon. We heard from a scientist, an industrialist, a regulatory expert and an environmentalist who gave details of the work that they and their respective organisations had carried out in the field of plant biotechnology. Their views, unsurprisingly, were very different. The scientist and the industrialist gave details of development work undertaken over a number of years. They concentrated on what they saw to be the benefits of this type of research and the resulting technological developments. The regulatory expert advised caution in terms of the speed at which the new techniques were introduced to ensure that all possible safety aspects had been covered. The environmentalist, to my surprise, gave what I considered to be a very balanced view, but urged caution in terms of the introduction of new techniques as there were no long-term studies covering the side effects, especially as far as the consumer was concerned.

To start with it was very confusing for members of the panel but most of us had done some research, which in my case was reading the seemingly never-ending stream of information being sent to me once I was told I was on the lay panel. Some of my colleagues had more time available and had been scouring their local libraries, colleges and schools to ensure they had plenty of background knowledge. Hour by hour, the jigsaw started to take shape.

It became clear during the early stages that some members of the panel had come with fixed ideas about the subject of plant biotechnology. A few seemed to think that it was wrong to be 'playing around with nature', others were unsure about possible side effects, and some were more concerned about who was 'in control'. My particular concerns were centred on control, monitoring and accountability. People's views began to change as the weekend progressed, and every waking moment was filled with discussion and debate including conversation at meal times and visits to the pub.

During the course of the weekend some concerns started to emerge about the size of the task confronting us. Although the conference date was two

months away, we had only seven days together in which to debate and discuss the topic and produce a written report which would be delivered at the final session of the conference. There were a number of times when we began to lose sight of our objective but the lay-panel facilitator usually pulled us back on course.

The role of the facilitator was a difficult job and the steering committee had recruited someone to undertake this task. My understanding of the role of a facilitator (from my experience in my working environment) is that it is someone who helps the group to achieve its objective. This may include basic practicalities such as timekeeping, and the provision of facilities and equipment. The facilitator should *not* direct opinion on the subject matter under discussion. As time progressed the members of the lay panel became increasingly concerned about the involvement of the facilitator in the subject matter. During our final 'closed' session when we were writing the report we decided to operate entirely on our own.

After the first preparatory weekend, I left for home feeling totally exhausted but still excited and looking forward to the next session.

The second preparatory weekend

At the second preparatory weekend, it was good to meet everyone again but it was quite obvious that, whilst there was not exactly an air of panic, it was clear to all of us that the pressure was on. The weekend followed a similar pattern to the first one, but our debate and discussion was now showing some sort of structure and we had been able to have some input to selection of the people from whom we wished to hear. Over the two days in Abingdon we heard from experts in various fields covering the technical issues, the impact on the environment, on consumers, and moral and religious issues. Two media representatives were present for part of the weekend. They were compiling information and comments for articles to be published ahead of the conference. A producer from BBC radio was also present. She was preparing a programme on volunteers and wanted input from members of the lay panel to use in the broadcast—a few of us discussed our initial interest and our roles up to that point.

The experts appeared to have as diverse a range of opinion as the panel and at one particular session they came very close to blows, much to the

amazement of the lay-panel members. We were obviously touching a few nerves and the discomfort was obvious. This particular weekend ended in some haste as we had spent quite a lot of time trying to decide on the stage layout for the final conference when we should, perhaps, have spent more time selecting the names of the people we wanted to invite to the final conference and planning our questioning strategy.

Ever since the conference was first announced and the selection of the lay panel completed, concern had been expressed in the media about our objectivity. The inference, rather than any specific comment, was that the only people who became involved with this type of exercise belonged to 'fringe' groups who would perhaps see the conference as an opportunity to promote their views. This continued throughout the course of our enquiries and was apparent in a number of articles appearing in the press both before and after the report (see the Appendix, this volume) was published. For example:¹

'BBSRC [Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, funders of the UKNCC] want to counter suspicions that the project is an industry public relations exercise, yet it is clear that they hope the panel will give plant genetic engineering the thumbs-up. The panel can call experts with a range of views, including environmentalists, but such critics must be introduced early on in the process when the questions are being framed in order to have much influence.'

However, I know that I came to the first session with an open but enquiring mind and, whilst some of my colleagues had done some 'homework' on the topic of plant biotechnology, we were all starting at square one.

The conference

Once again it was good to meet the rest of the team and find out what they had been doing since the last weekend. Some had been in touch with local schools to try and gain some information from children and teachers about their thoughts on the subject. Others had written articles for their local papers and invited comments from readers. This activity revealed various degrees of interest in the topic ranging from not very much to absolutely none. This may be to do with the fact that, currently, there is very little, if anything at all, for the public at large to be concerned about. Genetically

modified foods do not fill large areas of shelving at my local supermarket and, until that situation changes, the public will have little cause for interest or concern.

Everyone was eager to get on with the conference although most of us were a bit apprehensive at the thought of appearing on stage. Most of us went to the conference venue on the eve of the conference just to get a feel for the place and to see if our suggested layout for the stage looked right. The effect was good, although it was difficult to imagine what it was going to feel like the next morning when the large hall would be full of people.

We arrived at Regent's College in good time on the Wednesday morning ready for a number of photo calls and interviews that had been arranged with reporters from newspapers and radio programmes. The media interest in the conference had certainly picked up over the previous two or three weeks with reports of our preparatory weekends and predictions as to the tone of our report. Scaremongering headlines appeared in a few papers and were to be repeated following the publication of our report, a few days later (for example, on the evening of the last day of the conference an article was published in the London *Evening Standard*, entitled "'Frankenfood' scientists told: don't play God').

The conference was introduced by John Durant, chairman of the steering committee, with a welcome to those in the audience. There was quite an impressive turnout with most of the seats taken. He went on to explain the background to the conference and outlined the work that the lay panel had undertaken prior to the conference. The conference was officially opened by Earl Howe, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The chairman, Peter Evans (the well-known broadcaster and presenter of the radio programme *Science Now*), then invited the first group of experts on to the stage and our 'interrogation' of the experts began (Figure 2).

The first day passed quite quickly with all the lay-panel members taking part by asking questions and making comments and observations. Most of our initial concerns and nervousness disappeared as we started to enjoy the discussion and debate. We were treated quite kindly by most of the participants who took time to correct misunderstandings and help with explanations of some of the more complicated technical details. One or two spectators, who identified themselves as belonging to the



Figure 2. The UK National Consensus Conference on Biotechnology.

environmental lobby, were still casting doubts on our credibility: how could we possibly come to any sort of decision without being able to properly understand the technical complexities of the subject? My own view, and that of most of my colleagues on the panel, was that we were not there to make technical judgements or, necessarily, come to a decision. The whole idea of consensus is to reach agreement as to the way that the general public, of whom the panel were 'representative', would wish this research to proceed and, if necessary, be controlled. Some knowledge of the procedures and techniques gave us a better understanding and would enable us to reach a balanced conclusion or consensus.

The second day started where the first one had finished with more input and discussion from interested parties. This included people from the research institutes involved in plant biotechnology, representatives from companies who were providing funding for the research and who were then hoping to obtain a payback from sales of the 'engineered' products. We also heard from environmentalists, consumer groups, and anyone else in the hall who felt they had a contribution to make. By the time we adjourned at 15.00 we had collected a lot more information. We retired to our hotel and reconvened at 17.00 to write our report.

None of us had any experience of how to conduct this part of the exercise and, for reasons of impartiality, we had been given very little guidance. We were given a deadline of midnight by which time we had to have our report ready for the printers and, initially, this seemed realistic. As time went on, however, it became obvious that this was far too ambitious.

From the outset, the evening needed to be organised in order for us to have any hope of producing the report: the third day would have been something of an anticlimax without it. There had been some discussion amongst members of the panel during the first two days of the conference about the role of the facilitator. We decided that, to preserve our impartiality, we should fend for ourselves during the final closed session, but it became obvious to most of us that some element of control would be needed. The suggestion was made that we elect a chairman. We decided to hold a secret ballot for this unenviable role and I was elected.

As different people had interests in different aspects of the debate, seven folders were prepared each of which contained one of the seven questions that we had posed to the experts at the conference (see the Appendix, this volume). Every member of the panel was asked to put down his or her own thoughts on each of the questions. Afterwards, we split into groups of two or three to write up the responses to one question. It was then my intention to circulate each response to every group for amendment so that every panellist would have an opportunity to contribute to every section of the report. The groups retired to different corners of the hotel to carry out this work and we adjourned at about 21.00 for dinner.

The work was far more time-consuming than any of us had envisaged because even though we had specific interests in different parts of the report, we all wanted to ensure that the other parts were not saying something that we disagreed with. This was the point at which it became obvious that we were not going to meet our first deadline. We reconvened after dinner. At about midnight, I decided that we had to speed up the process so we changed strategy. We all got together and began going through the report, question by question, with all the panellists present. It was now well into the morning; the first and, by now, the second printing deadline had come and gone and we seemed to be making very little progress. Tempers, not surprisingly, were becoming frayed but we all decided we were not going to fail at the final hurdle and at

about 05.30 we despatched the secretary to the printers.

Feelings had run very high, tempers had been lost, but we did not resort to violence which, in itself, was no mean achievement. The word 'consensus' had now taken on a whole new meaning for most of the panel and reflected everything that went on during that 12-hour session at which we finally produced the report. Some of us went for a walk, we refreshed ourselves, had breakfast and went to the conference.

Friday morning at 10.00, we appeared on the platform looking bright eyed, bushy tailed and totally in control. This final session consisted of various members of the panel delivering sections of the report and then Peter Evans invited a number of distinguished visitors to comment. Questions were then invited from the floor. The final session closed at about 12.00.

Reaction to the report

In the main, the lay panel's report was well received, particularly by the industry representatives present who breathed an audible sigh of relief. Whilst some environmental lobbyists were not quite so pleased with the lack of bite in some of our recommendations, they did acknowledge the effort the panel had made. Most of the panel members were dismayed at the response by a member of the House of Lords who was dismissive of our report in terms of its contribution to the wider debate. However, he did try to redress the balance a few days later when he wrote to a national newspaper *The Independent* in response to their conference report. An extract of his letter reads as follows:²

'... The House of Lords select committee on science and technology report on biotechnology did not, as your reporter alleges, call for regulations to be swept away, only that they should be somewhat relaxed and more science based. Nor did I reject the conference's call for closer monitoring. What I did say was that monitoring was needed, but that the conference's suggestion of an ombudsman was not the way to do it. I said it should be done by the Health and Safety Executive and that the number of its inspectors should be increased so that the job could be done properly. As far as labelling is concerned I repeated the select committee's conclusion that general labelling would send the wrong signal, namely that genetically modified organisms are inherently dangerous in the way that tobacco is... Lastly, I welcome

conferences of this kind for they must add to public awareness of a difficult subject, and I welcome the conference's conclusion that "new technology is welcome, provided it is properly regulated and controlled". That, after all, is what the select committee believes, too.'

Nevertheless, the panel was of the opinion that he tried to denigrate its efforts by suggesting that it could not present an informed report.

We knew we did not have abundant knowledge or expertise—this was one of the main reasons we were selected, but we all felt that in producing our report on time (it arrived at the conference about 10.30) we had discharged our responsibilities and produced a document which would provoke debate and discussion for many months.

Reflections

- Consensus is not easy to achieve—to quote one of my fellow panellists 'there is nothing like finding yourself faced with a conflict of opinion at about two in the morning for testing the depth of conviction'.
- Would I accept the role of panel chairman again? Yes I would, but with the benefit of this experience I would examine other ways of gathering and collating the evidence we needed to include in the report. In terms of developing leadership skills the experience was invaluable. Did I make full use of the skills that other panel members possessed? Did I ask them to contribute fully to the task of report preparation? Time constraints were, in the end, seriously against us and some decisions had to be made without the benefit of discussion.
- Did I enjoy it? Definitely, it reached parts of the brain I did not know existed.
- Were the timescales right? No, I do not think they were. The weekend sessions tended to be rushed and I would hesitate to recommend the overnight report-writing session.
- Did we need more preparation time? Yes, I think we did, possibly in the form of an additional preparatory weekend.

I had almost no knowledge of biotechnology before I became involved in the UKNCC. That situation has changed significantly, not in the sense that I now see myself as an expert, but that the experience has broadened my interest in scientific matters generally and in biotechnology in particular. I take much more interest in labels on supermarket

products now than I did before the conference, I take more interest in the science columns in newspapers than I used to, and I find that I have a better understanding of some of the topics covered in television science programmes.

In conclusion, it is my opinion that the effort that my colleagues and I expended over those few days produced an important report, but the acceptance of the principle of the consensus conference is paramount. Consensus conferences can, and should, add to debate on a wide range of topics.

Sir Walter Bodmer, Director General of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, and current winner of the Royal Society's Michael Faraday

award for promoting science to the public, was interviewed by Peter Evans on national radio. The UKNCC was mentioned, and, in response to a suggestion that it was optimistic to assume that a lay person would not have difficulties wading through the complexities of modern science, Sir Walter said that he thought that a lot could be made accessible to everyone and stressed the importance of jargon-free dialogue.

One final thought. No matter what else happens—even if nothing else happens—all the members of the lay panel have their own little piece of history: we were all there at the first UK national consensus conference.

Notes and references

- 1 'Search for "consensus" on biotechnology', *GenEthics News*, 2 (July/August 1994), p4
- 2 Lord Howie of Troon, 'Letters to the Editor', *The Independent* (10 November 1994)
- 3 'Science Now', *Radio 4*, BBC (10 July 1996)