

The Corruption of our National Academies

Up until a few months ago, I was a big supporter of our National Academies. **No more.**

A fact of life today is that the internet has facilitated the rapid and continuous dissemination of misinformation and disinformation by those promoting nothing more than self-serving interests. Lobbyists are well aware of this power and have launched an unprecedented “marketing” assault on citizens and politicians.

The motivations are simple: **greed** and **power**. Yes that has always been around, but today we have the perfect storm. We now toss around “Trillions of dollars” like these are some reasonable amounts! These staggering and unparalleled disbursements have (not surprisingly) spawned the most sophisticated and aggressive breed of profiteers that we have **ever** encountered in history!

As a physicist and longtime environmental advocate, I know that it is critically important that (to counter this onslaught) there be a source of **competent, objective, scientific information** on the technology issues (like energy) that we face today. *I had looked to the National Academies to fill that essential role.*

No more. Here is the tale of woe that came about when I happened to peek under an innocent looking rock.

It started by my looking over a report in one of my fields of expertise: “Electricity from Renewable Sources...” (<<<http://tinyurl.com/ld4wrdd>>>).

Having read many hundreds of energy reports, it didn’t take long to see that this document was nothing more than agenda propaganda, and that any connection with science was inadvertent and purely happenstance.

I was surprised that such a PR piece had been released by the Academies, and decided to investigate whether this was an aberration, or a degradation of standards. I was put in touch with a senior scientific person at the Academies — we’ll play Dear Abby here and (to protect the innocent) call him “Dr. D.”

I had several lengthy correspondences with Dr. D, and the more I heard, the more concerned I became. In the beginning, after I objected to the lack of science and objectivity in this report, Dr. D tried to dismiss my contentions by stating that I simply didn’t like its conclusions.

That, of course, was a disingenuous response, as I had said nothing about the report’s conclusions, and had focused my comments on its **methodology**. Unfortunately, this was a sign of similar foolishness to come.

After receiving a barrage of excuses for the report’s unscientific methods, I finally asked Dr. D outright: are you more a defender of the Academies’ existing report system, **or** a person genuinely interested in improving it?

He contended that he was both. Unfortunately that also has proved to be inaccurate, as in our entire 21 pages of correspondence there was not a single matter where he said anything remotely like: “That’s a good idea — I will do everything I can to incorporate that into our study process.”

My main message to him was: “I have been an ardent supporter of the National Academies. **Due to their good standing in the scientific and political community, the Academies have been targeted by lobbyists to become another outlet for promotion of their financial interests.**”

“Despite your belief that that the Academies’ report system is robust, it HAS been compromised by the ‘Electricity from Renewable Resources...’ study.”

I won’t bore you with all the details of our communications, but what I eventually did was to boil down the many issues we covered, into four key ones.

To make absolutely sure that I was not reading something into what Dr. D might have rashly said to me, I asked him to answer these four questions, in writing (regarding reports put out by the Academies):

- 1 - What’s more important: the **Process** or the **Result**?
- 2 - What’s more important: “**consensus science**” or **scientific methodology**?
- 3 - What’s more important: **Confidentiality** or **Transparency**?
- 4 - Does a committee member whose employment is directly connected to the results of their report have a **bias** or a **conflict of interest**?

Please give these some thought, before reading about his answers. I posed these particular queries as to me the core issue here is **scientific integrity**. *If the Academies are not an objective bastion of scientific information, then who is?*

To simplify matters, I purposely phrased each question so that the **second** option was what I believe is the correct answer. Surprisingly (to me), despite some pontification, Dr. D said that the Academies chose the **first** option to each of the questions. I found none of his responses to be satisfactory, or science-based.

To me, the most disturbing fact was that Dr. D studiously avoided the Academies from taking the “scientific role” throughout this whole report process.

For instance, his unexpected answer to my first question (I’m paraphrasing) was: **the less evidence there is available, the more the Academies deviate from scientific standards.** (Huh?!)

This flies in the face of ALL logic. It would seem to me that “where the available evidence is thin, or not definitive, or when deep ideological divisions exist” that all three of those circumstances would scream out: **BE EXTRA CAREFUL, AND GET MORE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE BEFORE PROCEEDING!**

Yet Dr. D said no to that, and instead stated that it was the Academies’ policy to *let a select handful of biased people make a guess that suited their agenda.*

Furthermore, regarding the *Renewable's Electricity* report, there are some 100,000 turbines actively producing data throughout the world today. Exactly how and **why** can the data from 100,000 turbines be "thin" or "not definitive"? The only conceivable explanation for that would be that the keepers of such data know that the results do not promote their financial interests, and therefore studiously avoid releasing it. Should the Academies tolerate that obfuscation?

In Dr. D's answer to my second question, he begrudgingly acknowledged that the result is "important."

However, he then stated that results "need to be supported by the best evidence available" which is a good sound bite, but is precisely what did NOT happen with the *Renewable's Electricity* report — and he already made an excuse for it in his prior answer. Good evidence DOES exist in this case, and if the committee members made a formal, public complaint about it's "non-availability," it is extremely likely that it would then get released.

The fact that they took no such action would indicate that the majority (along with their complicit "monitors") were willing to settle for speculation — even though they knew that hard data existed.

This exactly follows Dr. D's full script where he effectively said "the results need to be supported by the best evidence available, **but** if real evidence isn't easy to come by (**or** if it doesn't support the agenda of the majority of the committee) then the committee will forego such evidence, and instead rely on a consensus adjudication." *Amazing.*

I can't say it any better than this (<<<http://tinyurl.com/kpfldg>>>): "The work of science has nothing whatever to do with consensus. *Consensus is the business of politics*. Science, on the contrary, requires only one investigator who happens to be right, which means that he or she has results that are verifiable by reference to the real world. In science, consensus is irrelevant. **What is relevant is reproducible results.** The greatest scientists in history are great precisely because they broke with the consensus."

This is also a superb discussion of the scientific consensus concept
<<<http://tinyurl.com/yjbb7us>>>.

Regarding my third question, he again made a token acknowledgment, saying "Transparency is, of course, essential to the results..." The problem is that (despite these good words) there is essentially **zero** transparency in this study (and evidently in the Academies' normal review process).

Transparency is when **ALL of the review comments are published** (e.g. as an addendum and after the report is issued), **and each of these are identified as to their source.** Transparency is when all committee meeting minutes (and conflict of interest documents) are available to the public.

None of these happened in this case. Based on his words, Dr. D believes that “transparency” simply means listing the names of the reviewers and the monitors. How have we gotten to the point where such revisionist redefinitions are tolerated by esteemed academics?

Right after acknowledging that transparency was good, he then went about arguing against it. His first claim (unsupported) was that “transparency results in less quality reviews.” I sent him a study that concluded otherwise (<<<http://www.prsa.org/prjournal/Vol2No2/Rawlins.pdf>>>). Despite providing no data that supports his contention, he persists with this illogical opinion.

His second justification for doing an inferior job at transparency boiled down to his belief that other institutions do a worse job at transparency than the Academies do. I asked him if he was familiar with the adage “Two wrongs don't make a right?” No reply.

BTW, one more indicator about the Academies' transparency: I have written the study director of this project to send me some basic information on what transpired with this committee. He has refused to provide ANY of it.

After that I sent in a formal Freedom Of Information request for this information. The Academy has also stonewalled that, and provided none of the information. Transparency indeed.

Evidently the NAS didn't get the memo, sent out by President Obama on his first day in office <<<http://www.justice.gov/oip/foiapost/2009foiapost8.htm>>>. Agencies were directed to respond to requests promptly and in a spirit of cooperation. I suspect that the NAS has decided that they are above all this, despite the public funding they receive. Interesting that we have evolved to the point where the standards of NAS are LESS than those for federal agencies.

Dr. D continued on by providing another stunning answer to my last question. He stated: “A committee member whose employment is directly 'connected' to the results of a committee's work **may or may not** pose a conflict of interest.”

He then again launched into a defense of the Academies' venerable “process.” At no point did he explain exactly how it is determined that a committee member whose employment is directly connected to the results of a report he is writing, would **not** have a conflict of interest.

Likewise he did not explain how another conflict situation has been deemed acceptable by the Academies: a committee member who has a financial relationship with a study's sponsor (e.g. like GE Energy in this case) — or is an employee of a study's sponsor!

Before my correspondence with Dr. D I believed that the Academies would always err on the side of caution. His commentary indicates that the exact opposite has evolved, so that now (for instance) the term “conflict of interest” has been so diluted that it has effectively lost its meaning.

What is proved by a “consensus” if there are (let's say) nine committee members, and five whose employment depends on their promotion of a particular agenda? What assurance does a reader of such a report have that a “consensus” by these five members means that the Academies’ document has genuine scientific legitimacy or integrity? *Very little*, would be the obvious conclusion.

The keystone of Dr. D’s arguments is that he believes that the Academies have a stellar review process that effectively pre-empts any corruption of the system and the results.

As I wrote him, his listing of their checks and balances was impressive, but it reminds me of the extensive list of checks and balances we were told were in place regarding our home mortgage system. One has to only look at the sub-prime fiasco to see how self-serving participants along the way were able to successfully and effectively subvert such “checks and balances.”

It seems to me that the well-intended controls of the Academies' report system have lulled the organization into a complacency — which has now resulted in a breach of their defenses. A report like the one I discussed with them undermines all the standards and credibility that the Academies have worked many years to establish and uphold.

The fact is that the Academies' good review process has become dated, which is no surprise considering that it was literally designed for the horse and buggy era. We now have greenwashing, twitters, social marketing, sophisticated pseudo-science, etc., etc. The Academies absolutely **MUST** adjust to this new reality, or they will be eroded into oblivion — a process already begun.

My initial correspondence with Dr. D began with beliefs that:

- 1 - he was first and foremost a scientifically oriented person,
- 2 - he would welcome suggestions for improving the Academies’ review process to make it better, and
- 3 - he would personally see to it that as many good suggestions were enacted as possible.

It now seems (based on his words and actions) that these assumption were all incorrect. It appears that:

- 1 - Dr. D is first and foremost a defender of the Academies’ study system,
- 2 - Dr. D does not genuinely welcome suggestions for improvement as he feels that the Academies’ process is at a sufficiently high level, and
- 3 - based on that opinion, he also has little interest in implementing improvements to the Academies’ process.

I also started with a concern that Dr. D and the Academies had unknowingly been victimized by some very slick promoters. After hearing his justifications, it has instead become quite clear that Dr. D is actually an **enabler** of such scams.

His complacency has invited in those whose objective it is to undermine the good name and works of the Academies. *Shame on him and other like-minded persons at the Academies!*

BTW, I am not the only one who has come to these conclusions about the Academies' process (and this report). An excellent critical commentary from a reviewer of this particular report was done by energy expert Glenn Schleede: <<<http://tinyurl.com/nqy6uk>>>.

So what is the solution?

Option one seems to be to fix the situation at the Academies, so that their sole focus is to provide objective and sound scientific analyses. Their new policy should state (and their new process insure) that **no technical report will be issued under the Academies' name unless it is firmly rooted in scientific methodology**. The jury is still out as to whether or not this is possible, but current receptiveness and mindset so far say that this is a long shot.

Option two is to start a new organization, whose sole objective is to ascertain the scientific soundness of technical policies, legislative proposals, organizations' agendas, etc. I have drafted up some ideas as to how this would work, and the proposed name is "Scientific Integrity Foundation" (SIF): <<<http://www.northnet.org/brvmug/WindPower/SIF.pdf>>>.

My position regarding our energy situation is that:

- 1 - we do have serious **energy** and **environmental** problems,
- 2 - we need solutions that are **technically sound** (e.g. reliable),
- 3 - we need solutions that are **economically** prudent, and
- 4 - we need solutions that have provably net **environmental** benefits.

My experience is that #2 through #4 are NOT happening. The main reason for this is that the process has become over-run with lobbyists and political agenda organizations (e.g. AWEA, Union of Concerned Scientists, the Sierra Club, NREL, now the National Academies, etc.). The end result is that we are being dictated solutions that are palliative political pablum.

In my view the only way out of this quagmire is to go back to the basics: **Scientifically Sound Solutions**. The most fundamental part of this is that any new idea (e.g. industrial wind power) must be subjected to the process of scientific methodology. This is a comprehensive, objective assessment of the merits of any such proposal. If it passes, then we assess #3 & #4.

If it succeeds with all three, then we should adopt it forthwith. If it fails, then its advocates go back to the drawing board.

Of course lobbyists (and even some well-intentioned folks) are saying “we don’t have time to verify that new proposals really work — there’s too much at stake to wait another minute!”

My contrarian view is: ***the more there is at stake, the more certain we have to be that what we are doing really works!***

I don't know what clever name to call that principle (common sense?), but it is an idea that has apparently escaped most all of our esteemed organizations, government agencies, politicians, etc.

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4/2/11