

Politics and “Sound” Science

By Dave Person

Recently, we have been treated to the spectacle of legislators and political pundits commenting on the science concerning polar bears and global warming. One Alaskan state representative suggested that scientists are like lawyers, implying that they tailor their results to the needs of whoever pays the bills. He went on to say that the public deserves “sound science” on the issues and he was determined to buy his version of it with a couple of million dollars from the legislature. Listening to those politicians and pundits talk about “sound science” is like listening to Tony Soprano discussing “ethical” business practices. You know that the phrase is backed up by a very dubious idea of what science is about. Now I am not trying to simply pick on politicians. As George Carlin reminded us, “They come from American parents and American families, American homes, American schools, American churches, American businesses and American universities, and they are elected by American citizens...This is what we have to offer.” In short, they are a reflection of the public. If they don’t understand much about science, most of the general public probably doesn’t either.

It is very difficult for anyone who subscribes to some political ideology to view science through an objective lens. To many politicians, science is “sound” if it agrees with their prejudices or agendas, and “junk” if it does not. Ideologues think they know the “truth” and attempt to shoehorn all evidence into that truth, while scientists seek evidence about a “truth” they do not know. Unfortunately for political partisans, scientific results often do not fit neatly into the proper boxes that define their world. Politics and science usually do not mesh very well and there is often tension between them. So be it. That tension stimulates creativity, energy, debate, and discovery; harmony would induce sleep.

Science is a process to obtain reliable knowledge while controlling for human biases and distortions. That, of course, is the ideal but human biases always find ways into the process. Nonetheless, peer-review is an effective measure to reduce those biases and is fundamental to science. No other human institution has a comparably rigorous vetting process. Thus, while a few scientists may behave like lawyers, the scientific process tends to limit most of the damage. With respect to attempts by some legislators to buy “sound” science on polar bears and global warming, let them have their “dog and pony” show. It won’t matter much more than a tick on a vole’s bottom. As John Adams once said, “facts are stubborn things”, and rigorous science and reliable knowledge will ultimately win the day.