

Foreword

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If ever there was a time when scientists and policy-makers needed to work together, it is now during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scientific evidence can be hard to interpret; the balancing act that politicians spend their lives performing depends on more than this evidence because they care (possibly too much) about voters' wishes. Appreciating the way these two, sometimes conflicting, trajectories interweave is crucial if a scientist is to be effective in the policy space. CUSPE and its work provide a wonderful way for students to examine these interactions first-hand and experience some of the challenges that they provide.

Sustainability is one arena where science and policy can collide painfully. Scientists may collectively believe whole-heartedly in anthropogenic climate change but deciding what to do about it in a way that will be acceptable to populations is another matter, particularly since global solutions must be sought. It is not sufficient for a scientist to say: stop burning fossil fuels or, alternatively or as well, introduce a carbon tax. In practice these things can't be done with a click of the finger of a leading politician. So, what can be done? How can scientists provide both evidence and insight that is actually useful to someone drawing up policy? That is a difficult question for anyone to answer, but imperative that scientists try to find a way that works for them and the specific problem in hand.

There are many other areas beyond sustainability – often the so-called wicked societal problems – where what a scientist thinks is the 'obvious' solution given the evidence may be totally unpalatable or impractical in our democracy. It is important to learn the tools of what may be persuasive, how to approach the policy-makers and when to back down, knowing that all the scientist can and should do has been attempted, whether or not successfully. Our education system is not great at teaching these skills alongside the purely scientific, yet we, as a nation, need people skilled at crossing the divide and helping decision-makers reach the best decisions. CUSPE provides a forum for early career researchers to learn, practice and perfect these skills.

Of course, mastering the ability to communicate is not just about spoken words, but about written arguments too. Being able to write succinctly, without drowning the reader in technical jargon, is a necessary skill to learn to be persuasive. Practicing the short, pithy briefing note is a good way to learn this skill. Getting to grips with clarity, excising excessive impenetrable detail is an art which takes time to perfect. Writing articles like those included here is an excellent introduction. I salute CUSPE for its work and wish it well.

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About the Author



Athene Donald is a physicist who is well known for her early work on synthetic polymers, concentrating on relating the structure of polymers to their function. Athene subsequently transferred her knowledge to soft matter and biological physics more broadly, developing specialised imaging techniques such as environmental scanning electron microscopy along the way.

In 1999 she was elected to the Royal Society and it was through her role chairing their Education Committee from 2010-14 that she really got stuck into the policy interface, beyond that simply concerned with research funding. She also served on their Council in two separate stints. In 2006, she was the Bakerian Lecturer for the Royal Society and in 2010 was awarded the Faraday Medal of the Institute of Physics and also received a DBE for services to physics. Beyond her research, Athene has an active interest in issues surrounding gender equality. She was the University's first gender equality champion and recently won THE's Lifetime Achievement Award for her work in this space. She is the current Master of Churchill College, Cambridge.