

**Speech as Chair of Plenary Session “Dialogue between Political Leaders and Scientists”  
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Good Morning Speakers and Guests,

A warm welcome to all of you and thank you for coming to the Science and Technology for Society Forum 2006.

Thank you, Mr. Omi, Chairman of the STS forum, for giving me the honour of chairing this session.

Most of us here today will agree that there is a communication gap between political leaders and scientists. Scientists complain that politicians do not fully appreciate the importance of their work and the bureaucracy often frustrates them. Politicians gripe about the impracticality of scientists' views in the light of today's constraints. It would therefore be constructive for both parties to partake in an open and honest discussion to seek mutual understanding.

Political leaders are like heroic firemen who are ever ready to rush and put out spurious fires. Politicians take care of the interests and values of a diversified and at times incoherent range of social groups and individuals. They are concerned with seeking strategies to solve real-life problems as quickly as possible. The scientific knowledge they are interested in has to be relevant and applicable to a particular policy problem.

So resultant decisions made by many political leaders on scientific issues tend to solve problems in the short-term and place emphasis on quick results.

Scientists objectively pursue their intellectual interests and subjectively dream for a world of unhindered search for knowledge. They believe that their funding should be spared from short term pressures and politics. The outlook is long-term and the final outcomes of their research – be it a cure for cancer or alternative energy sources – are often far in the horizon of time.

This dichotomy in world views between the public and the political leaders on one side and the scientists on the other has alienated the scientists and diminished the role of science in the decision-making process among political leaders. In some cases, distrust in science has resulted in political leaders decreasing research funding at the expense of future returns on the economy, health and standard of living research provides. The fear of the complexities they do not fully understand has also increased the skepticism the public has of science.

This is time for both political leaders and scientists to think of new visions to bridge this chasm between the scientific and real world. How shall we build the bridge?

The dominant view is that scientists need to engage the public by going beyond providing technical expertise. The stakeholders of the process, which is society, will then be better advised when exercising their votes. The 1992 protest by scientists in Switzerland against the “Gene Protection Initiative”, which sought to ban all forms of genetic engineering, was successful because scientists began to have a dialogue with the citizens. How are we, as political leaders and scientists, going to encourage our science colleagues to do that? What policies or programmes can be undertaken for this purpose?

Baroness Susan Greenfield, director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, suggested wiping out the image of “the scientist in the white coat ‘talking down’ to people”. She also proposed creating a centre where politicians, scientists, humanists, artists and religious representatives could meet and debate.

What role will political leaders play in this debate – facilitators, spectators or active participants that initiate the dialogue between society and scientists? Can we also find a middle ground between the long- and short-term world view that politicians and scientists can agree upon?

There also needs to be better understanding between political leaders and scientists. Political leaders need to understand science to make better policies based on sound evidence from the scientists. Scientists need to understand real world concerns so they can give pragmatic scientific advice to political leaders.

What will be the best format for the dialogue between political leaders and scientists? And what roles should science and scientists play in policy formulation among political leaders?

It is my hope that today’s session will allow all of us here to come to a better understanding of the issues faced by politicians and scientists and their solutions.

The panel of speakers for today’s session is:

- Harold E. Varmus, President and Chief Executive Officer, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, US
- Ashok Kumar, Chair, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, Houses of Parliament, UK
- Ismael K. Al-Shatti, State Minister for Cabinet Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister, KW
- Pravich Rattanapian, Minister of Science and Technology, TH
- Yasuhisa Shiozaki, Senior Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, JP
- Barbara Schaal, Vice President, National Academy of Sciences, US

May I now welcome the first speaker to the podium...