

# How an approach to science helps define the political centre

November 14 2014, by Peter Ellerton

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Left ... right ... where's the centre? Credit: Flickr/Mike Leary , CC BY-NC-ND

There was a bit of talk over the last election cycle, expressed in the usual language of political left and right, about returning the pendulum to the "[sensible centre](#)".

Sounds a good idea, but what does it mean to be politically central? And where does science fit in?

It has always been a goal of politicians to define what this centre could be in terms most favourable to themselves. No-one wants to be seen as moving too far from the centre.

After all, it's simply not a vote-winner to be thought of as excessively left or right. But what people portray that political centre to be can shift left or right to suit the political needs of the time.

To whatever extent there can be an objective centre, rather than just a zone of subjective ideological comfort, it must in part be defined by objective analysis.

Part of that analysis involves the concepts of social equality and wealth generation, but there is also a role here for science.

## **Enlightenment and the political centre**

German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his 1784 essay [What is Enlightenment](#) promoted the "freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters". This devotion to public reasoning, and to accepting the consequences of free inquiry, is perhaps the most characteristic aspect of an enlightened society.

The ability and willingness to engage in reasoned debate is a hallmark of civil progress, at least in western liberal democracies.

Neither the political left or right have any legitimate claim to the exclusive ownership of this idea, and it would seem a useful point on which to centre a political continuum.

Perhaps the most successful manifestation of public reason in our society is science. Not only does it have a rational base, that rationality is itself collaboratively moderated. It is also subjected to a reality amenable

to experimentation and inference.

Given this, how a particular government deals with science is indicative of its commitment to public reasoning – and hence of its proximity to the political centre.

A government wishing to avoid accusations of extreme ideology would therefore wish to demonstrate by its words and actions that it:

- promotes reason and argumentation as the most appropriate mechanism by which a society communicates and debates
- understands that we are grounded in the real world and that science is the best way we have of understanding it
- is committed to evidenced based action, where evidence is a result of sound scientific inquiry.

The more tenuous the connection to these points, the stronger the argument that a government is driven largely by ideology.

## **How serious is the government about science?**

How well a government can claim to have achieved these can be judged using certain metrics, such as:

- a preference for accuracy and reasoned argument as manifest in public debate
- the clarity and frequency of public acknowledgement of the importance of science
- substantial financial and structural support for scientific institutions to ensure the provision of the best possible scientific advice
- a focus on public understanding of science as evidenced by the promotion of and investment in science education.

These are not the only metrics to use, but they are necessary ones.

## **Don't confuse rejection of science with reasoned argument**

Accepting the principles of the Enlightenment is certainly a claim for the political centre, but this acceptance can be illusory.

For example, one might imagine that the freedom to speak (an enlightenment ideal) in opposition to the findings of science is valuable, and indeed it is. But to reject science for ideological purposes while claiming to embrace the ideals of the enlightenment is buffoonery.

Inevitably some will argue that what presents as science is sometimes biased reasoning or even deceit. This is rife in the case of [climate change](#)

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But to work within science to test the conclusions of science is one thing – this is, after all, the very lifeblood of science and what scientist continually do – to argue against its methodology and credibility is quite another.

We should not confuse simple rejection with reasoned argument.

If you don't agree with scientific findings, your argument still needs to be scientific. If it is not within or at least inclusive of science, it is not rationally based.

We are currently faced with a number of issues across a range of governments at all levels that provide a useful focus for some or all of these measures. These issues include [climate change](#), [renewable energy](#), [biodiversity](#), health, [education reform](#), natural resource management,

population planning and [consumer protection](#).

We have no shortage of opportunities to judge our governments against their claims of occupying the political centre. How these issues are dealt with using [scientific evidence](#) and reasoning is easily graded.

Let's be clear that the only stance in opposition to [science](#) is an ideological one. Unless that stance can be backed up with scientific evidence, particularly in cases involving the public interest, it is nothing but an assertion of a personally preferred political outcome on the part of those governing.

Our enlightened democracy deserves more than that.

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