

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 48 (2021)
Heft: 3

Artikel: And yet they are speaking
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051918>

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And yet they are speaking

Elements in parliament wanted the government's Covid-19 scientific task force to be banned from making public statements. In the end, this did not happen. Nevertheless, the episode has caused quite a stir. Relations between scientists and politicians remain delicate.

SUSANNE WENGER

“And yet it moves!” This is what scientist Galileo Galilei is supposed to have said in the 17th century to the Vatican Inquisition that forced him to recant his assertion that the earth moved around the sun – a claim that contradicted papal teaching. Now let us adapt and apply Galileo’s famous show of dissent to the government’s coronavirus scientific advisory task force. “And yet they are speaking!” one might say. Admittedly, juxtaposing the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force with Galileo is a little contrived. Yet Swiss commentators were recently making this comparison and wondering whether parliament actually wanted to go back to the dark ages.

This followed attempts in the National Council to ban the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force from making public statements. Before consultations began on the Covid-19 Act this spring, the influential National Council Economic Affairs and Taxation Committee expressed the wish that the task force no longer be allowed to comment on the Federal Council’s coronavirus measures and that it simply carry out its advisory role without making any public remarks. The committee later toned down this request following fierce criticism, and the National Council eventually also rejected a watered-down motion by 116 to 78 votes. Nevertheless, the episode has gone down as an attempt to silence the scientists.

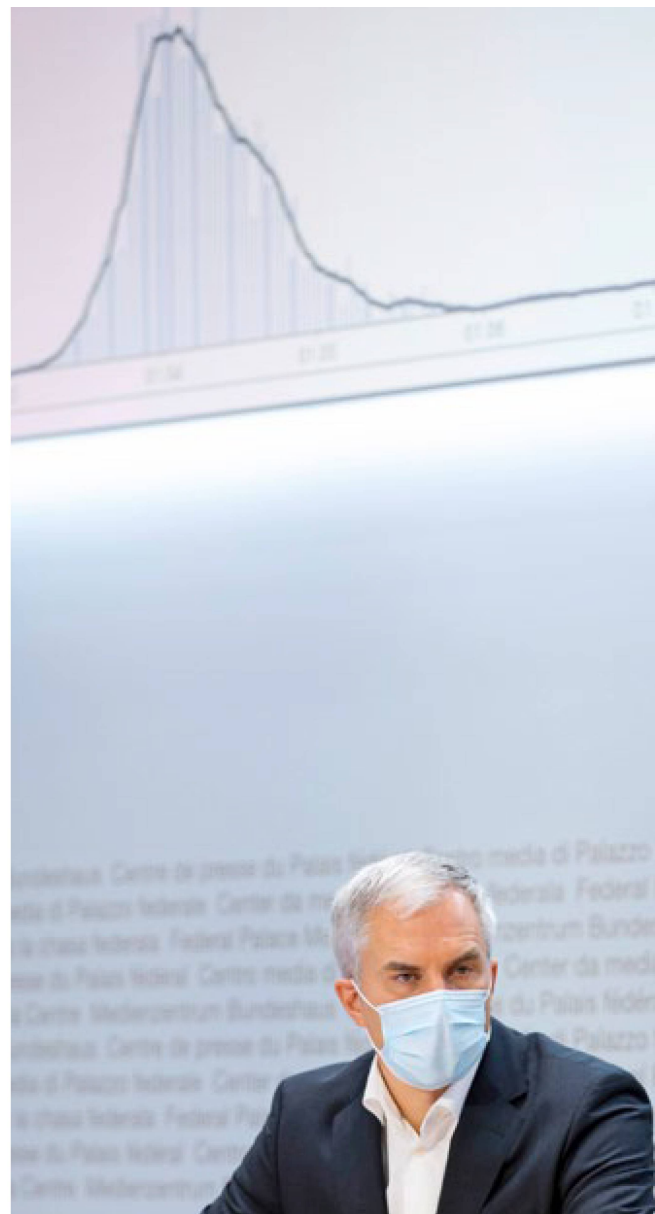
Political disgruntlement

The Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force comprises some 70 experts from many of Switzerland’s renowned universities and research bodies, covering a number of specialisms such as epidemiology, economics and ethics. The experts, who work voluntarily, regularly publish policy briefs

that evaluate the ongoing situation in light of new studies or other data. These publications constitute consolidated scientific assessments. Members of the task force have not only been speaking at Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) press conferences, but have also been giving interviews and making statements on social media. Their government mandate allows them to do so – creating a delicate situation in the process.

Some scientists have used the sudden limelight to deliberately vent their frustrations whenever politicians fail to implement their recommendations. Even before calling for the task force to be silenced, critics were accusing these experts of spreading alarm, exerting pressure on the authorities, and not speaking with one voice. The issue came to a head after the task force warned of a third wave – just when the centre-right and right-wing parties were trying to make the Federal Council lift Covid restrictions. In particular, the SVP, FDP and The Centre accused the task force of lacking a single voice on Covid. “The task force’s contra-

Sober appraisal of the infection curve – microbiologist and task force head Martin Ackermann was notable for his quiet, objective manner even during the controversial “silencing” episode. Photo: Keystone





National Councillor Regula Rytz: "An attempt to silence the bearers of bad news."

dictory statements have been unsettling people more than helping them," said Lucerne National Councillor for The Centre, Leo Müller, adding that clear communication and clear rules on what and what not to say were vital in times of crisis.

Freedom of speech for scientists

However, the SP, the Greens, the Green Liberals, and elements of the centre-right and right wing said that the scientists had a right to speak out. Berne National Councillor for the Greens, Regula Rytz, referred to an "attempt to silence the bearers of bad news". She said that enlightened liberal democracy would lose all credibility if it failed to take the experts seriously. The media also thought the episode crossed a line, calling it a "scandal". Limiting freedom of speech for scientists has a detrimental impact on society, wrote the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung". Scientists making their recommendations public was the only way in which people could make up their own minds about the measures being taken by politicians, the newspaper continued.

The task force, for its part, tried not to get drawn into the controversy. Its head Martin Ackermann, a professor of microbiology at ETH Zurich, whose quiet, objective manner had already been noticed, stressed that the task force was not telling politicians what to do. What it was doing was presenting a range of options, "that we know are effective in preventing infections". The information and statements provided by the task force were also of use to cantons, associations, businesses and the general public. Regarding accusations that the task force was spreading unnecessary alarm, Ackermann said that the purpose of making certain projections was precisely to prevent these scenarios from occurring.

End of lockdown – despite the data

Even though a "silencing order" never materialised, these projections went unheeded when the Federal Council announced an extensive easing of restrictions in April – contrary to the prevailing data. Meanwhile, the debate continues on the extent to which science should mix with politics. This applies not only to the pandemic, but to climate change and environmental issues. For example, the upcoming Clean Drinking Water initiative has highlighted divergences between the Federal Council on the one hand and,

on the other, water experts from ETH Zurich who have drawn attention to the pesticide issue. "Solution-oriented policymaking must take account of scientific facts," says Servan Grüninger, a biostatistician at the University of Zurich. Grüninger is the president of Reatch, a think tank that wants to bring science, politics and society closer together. Nevertheless, both science and politics must do more to make this cooperation work, he adds.

According to Grüninger, who is a member of The Centre, scientists are political amateurs who are unfamiliar with the machinations of power. "They think that their findings will automatically result in the right policies." Some need to be more aware that policymakers must also take economic and social aspects into account in addition to scientific evidence. Furthermore, they often don't know how to influence politicians effectively. When scientists start commenting on political issues, politicians can, in turn, quickly interpret this as arrogance or meddling. Scientists are only listened to when they concur.

Promoting dialogue

A project called Franxini now aims to promote mutual understanding. Scientists and politicians across the entire spectrum have launched it as a reaction to the "silencing" controversy surrounding the Covid-19 Act. The project is named after Stefano Franscini, the son of poor Ticinese farmers, who was quick to recognise the key importance of education. Franscini, a liberal, was elected to the Federal Council in 1848. He founded today's ETH Zurich and laid the foundation for the creation of the Federal Statistical Office. It is all about making scientists fit for politics, says Grüninger, whose Reatch think tank is behind the initiative. Intensive courses will equip scientists with all they need to know about the Swiss political system.

The project is already bearing fruit, at least as far as Marcel Salathé is concerned. The Genevan epidemiologist took a lot of political flak last year and has since left the task force. He now supports the Franxini project and is currently poring over the contents of the 900-page Handbook of Swiss Politics. "Read the blasted instructions," was his tongue-in-cheek comment on Twitter.

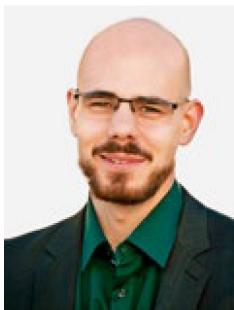
The article reflects the status as of 1 May 2021.

The Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force website:

www.sciencetaskforce.ch



National Councillor Leo Müller: "The task force's contradictory statements have been unsettling people more than helping them."



Biostatistician Servan Grüninger: "Many scientists think that their findings will automatically result in the right policies."