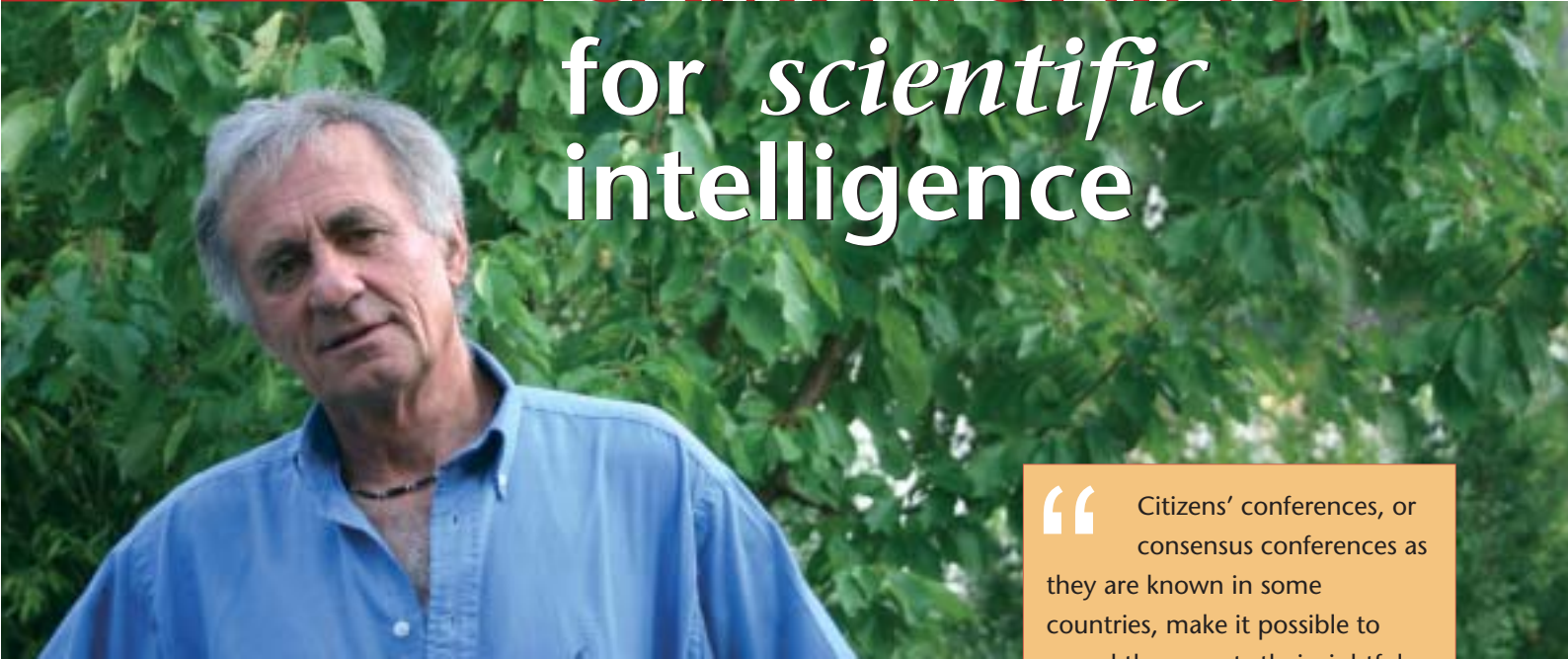


CAMPAIGNING for *scientific* intelligence



“ Citizens’ conferences, or consensus conferences as they are known in some countries, make it possible to award the experts their rightful place. We need experts, their knowledge and their opinions in order to form an opinion. But they cannot be the decision-makers, which is why ‘counter-experts’ must also be invited to these meetings. ”

Research director at INSERM (Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale), Jacques Testart is the recognised ‘father’ of the first baby conceived in France by means of in vitro fertilisation. That was back in 1982. Since then, genetics has entered the research world in a big way and this reproduction biologist has been quick to realise the risks it could pose to his own speciality. Personally rejecting certain avenues of research, he is campaigning for ethics-based rather than market-driven research and a more transparent and democratic science. He sees citizens’ conferences as a particularly interesting development in this respect – provided they are based on a code of practice that is recognised by both the law and the policy-makers.

In May 2003, Jacques Testart and his team resigned from the Sustainable Development Committee, a very official think-tank set up by the French Government. “The Committee was a laboratory of ideas, not a political circle. It is the censorship of our programme of activities that proved unacceptable,” he explained at the time. In particular, it was the refusal to organise a citizens’ conference on agricultural policy that was the last straw for a man who had always attached so much importance to relations between science and the people, and who was an active member of the Fondation Sciences Citoyennes, an association dedicated to placing science at the service of the common good.

Flashback to 24 February 1982: that was the day Amandine was born. It was then that Jacques Testart became a public legend, at least in France, as this little girl was the first ‘test tube baby’ to be born in the country. “The media made me into a kind of hero, whereas I had carried out research that was much more important in scientific terms before then, and have done since. But these efforts have received much less attention. Journalists decide what subjects must interest people and by pure chance I found myself in the media spotlight.”

Genetics and its ambiguities

Testart is a man who speaks his mind, setting out clear ideas, devoid of ambiguity, defending

dearly held ideas for which he is prepared to fight to the end. In 1986, he explained that there were certain research projects in which he did not want to be involved – those not aimed at helping sterile couples have children. He could sense the potential pitfalls of developments in genetics. Above all, he did not want genetics to be confused with procreation, and anticipated, in the possible connivance between the two, all the potential dangers and ethical issues that would be raised.

He knew, for example, that PID – preimplantation diagnostics – which makes it possible to select a ‘healthy’ egg before introducing it into the uterus – was not far off and could result in an eugenicist threat. “When PID became a possible practice, in the early 1990s, together with a geneticist colleague we made the proposal that researchers worldwide should pledge to respect a code already laid down in our

legislation, namely that 'diagnostics must solely concern genetic anomalies in each of the embryos conceived by a risk couple'. Most practitioners, especially abroad, refused. Some accused us of undermining democracy and the freedom of couples."

Democracy and freedom are words that must certainly have struck a nerve in Testart. Today, he is acutely aware that the only obstacle to the PID technique and possible eugenic aberrations is the shortage of embryos. When it becomes possible to produce dozens, it will simply be a matter of choosing the one that is 'supposed to be the best'. "We will reach the point where we will be producing individuals who conform to a necessarily objective ideal, resembling one another in terms of genetic structure as well as dietary habits. Socially cloned individuals, in a way, the very opposite of diversity."

Conferences

But is it not the socially acceptable, the best model, that most parents want – a healthy, beautiful and gifted child? Testart does not agree, placing his faith in the intelligence of those who have access to genuinely transparent information. He takes the death penalty as an example. "When French Justice Minister Robert Badinter resolved to end it, in 1981, it was clear that he was going against the majority opinion in the country. That could be seen as totally anti-democratic. But if we had organised a citizens' conference on the subject I am sure people would have agreed with Badinter, quite simply because they would have been informed."

It was under the auspices of the French Committee on Sustainable Development that Jacques Testart discovered the virtues of a first citizens' conference that was held in 2002 on the subject of energy. The carefully prepared debates respected precise rules. Citizens were selected by survey teams ("if you do it through the press you inevitably end up with people who are biased, one way or another"), and did not have any particular interest in the subject ("we are not lobbying"). The practice is for them to receive intensive training during two or three weekends prior to the event. "A multidisciplinary steering committee of experts, politicians, sociologists, etc., representing conflicting opinions on the subject, draws up a programme and chooses the instructors. The latter also hold a range of opinions which is why the programme can be seen as objective." The steering committee does not meet the citizens and a neutral person – a psychosociologist or PR professional – acts as a go-between, attending each of the weekend training sessions and resolving conflicts. The days are given over to presentations and debates. The citizens take their meals together, without the presence of the instructors so as to avoid any possible manipulation. Everything is filmed and

“ It is rather a pity that the precautionary principle, legal principle and technical principle have taken complete precedence over the principle of responsibility. This moral and humanist principle, formulated by the German philosopher Hans Jonas, stipulates that man must undertake no action that can jeopardise, in the future, the very existence of humanity or the quality of life on earth. The precautionary principle is more restrictive. It implies doing one's job well but has no implications for the result. Thus, if you grow genetically modified plants in accordance with the technical guidelines laid down by the experts, you are respecting this precautionary principle. But you are not concerned about the impact on the environment, biodiversity, health or the economy that must also be taken into account. ”

genuinely reflect a desire to act for the good of the community."

And then? What happens to these opinions? "The ideal would be to have this principle of democracy included in the legislation. Any contentious issue raised by a new technology would then be submitted to a citizens' conference that would be organised by an official national body in accordance with very strictly defined specifications. The resulting opinions would then be debated in parliament. That does not mean it would have to respect them – after all, we are living in a parliamentary democracy – but it would mean that these comments and proposals would be examined by the elected representatives who would then be responsible for the choices made, with information at their disposal in addition to the propaganda of the lobbies." ■

the tapes are made available to the sociologists or other experts working on the public debate.

At the end of the programme, the group asks the steering committee to invite other speakers so as to clarify certain points or to enable them to hear new arguments. "It is at this point that one becomes aware of just how much information the group has absorbed and the thought they have put into it. They have almost become experts themselves and their critical senses have been sharpened. The new speakers really come in for a grilling." Late into the night the group can still be busy drawing up their conclusions for a press conference the next day. "But very few journalists come. You see, the media are not very interested in listening to the ordinary citizen."

But surely one question remains. How can about 15 people express a credible opinion that is in principle representative of the population as a whole, even if they are selected according to a set of criteria defined by the surveyors, such as gender, region, age, political views or philosophical beliefs? Testart sees the answer in the information and the debates. "Each person can have a dangerous opinion as a result of having a personal interest in it. In a conference of this kind, people react as citizens and no longer as individuals.

They become altruistic and the conclusions they draw

BOOKS TO FIND OUT MORE

You can find out more about Jacques Testart through his many works which adopt a variety of approaches. They include novels (*Simon l'embaumeur ou la solitude du magicien*, Gallimard, 1989, and *Eve ou la répétition*, Odile Jacob, 1998), essays (*Des hommes probables*, Seuil, 1999), conversations with philosophers or scientists (*Au bazar du vivant*, Seuil, 2001, with Christian Godin, or *Pour une éthique planétaire*, with J.G.Reich, Mille et une nuits, 1997), and imaginary conversations in which he takes a fresh look at ancient texts (*Des grenouilles et des hommes, conversations avec Jean Rostand*, Stock, 1995).