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The laboratory of public debate: understanding the acceptability of stem cell research

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After an extensive period of public controversy, the Danish parliament legalised stem cell research on 'spare' embryos in 2003. This paper argues that this legalisation was dependent on a perception of acceptability among the public and explores how public debate can serve a 'performatory function' in establishing such a situation of perceived legitimacy. The intention of this paper, however, is not to examine the Danish controversies in order to unravel the substantial ethico-political issues in the governance of stem cell research, but rather to understand the specific processes through which the formation of public opinion has contributed to the shaping of the acceptability of stem cell research. The paper analyses the various constructions of legitimate voices and their representation in the policy process and demonstrates that the framing of representation changed during the policy process. This change in framing made it possible to obtain a compromise, and can therefore be seen as a necessary precondition for the decision to permit stem cell research.

The Danish public is generally seen to be sceptical towards biotechnology (Bauer and Gaskell, 2002), a scepticism that collides with the explicit wish by government to make biotechnology a key factor in future economic growth. In 2002 an expert committee identified stem cell research as a very promising scientific field, and argued that the previous ban on experiments with embryos should be lifted (Gene Technology Committee, 2002). Until then, the government had been reluctant to ease the limitations. Nevertheless, after a policy process involving calls for public deliberation and a formal hearing, legislation was changed in 2003 in order to permit research on 'spare' embryos.

Observing this policy process, it is argued in what follows that the creation of public acceptance is one of the necessary enabling conditions for the development of stem cell research. Without a certain level of public support, Danish policy makers would have found it difficult to legalise embryonic stem cell research. Academically, this requirement for public acceptability has usually been perceived as an issue of democracy and transparency in the governance of science and technology (Jasanoff, 2004; Jong and Mentzel, 2001; Joss, 1999; Liberatore and Funtowicz, 2003). The present paper adopts a different approach. Instead of advocating democratic engagement in the governance of science and technology, it seeks to explore how public debate can be seen to influence the governance of science and technology. This change of perspective is not an effort to abandon the normative ideal of democratic public debate. Rather, it is an attempt to expand the comprehension of this ideal by analysing its performative (Law and Urry, 2004) functions in specific processes of policy formation (what does public debate do?).

Several aspects of the issue of embryonic stem cell research have been regarded as controversial in Denmark. However, the main conflict has been over the question of whether it is acceptable to use embryos for research in a way that destroys the embryo: thereby treating the embryo as a means to some end, rather than as an end in itself. The Danish debate bears a number of similarities with stem cell debates in other parts of the Western world (Holland et al., 2001; Gottweis, 2002; Holm, 2002; Lee, 2001), although the issue of human cloning was not as much in the foreground as it has been in other national debates over stem cell research (e.g. Harvey, 2005).
The fact that these debates have lead to different regulations in different national contexts has sparked a number of studies of, for instance, policy narratives (Gottweis, 2002), traditions of ethical reasoning (Hauskeller, 2004), and the competition between religious and other institutions for the worldviews of the public (Nisbet, 2005). The intention of the present paper, however, is not to examine the Danish controversies in order to unravel the substantial ethico-political issues in the governance of stem cell research, but rather to understand the specific processes through which public opinion formation has contributed to the shaping of the acceptability of stem cell research.

Public debate is defined in this paper as the public negotiations about what should count as ‘acceptable’ in relation to stem cell research. By studying these negotiations, the paper explores how public debate serves a performative function by shaping the framing of representation. On a more general level, this analysis illustrates how the performative function of public debate might influence the governance of science and technology, since different framings of representation can be seen to subscribe to different models of governance.

Conceptual background

It is characteristic of the Danish governance of biotechnology that controversies have been followed by calls for extended public debate, which is construed as an important means to solve these controversies (Lund and Horst, 1999). In these calls it is generally implied that public deliberation will make it possible to identify acceptable as well as unacceptable uses of biotechnology. As mentioned, it has been common to regard these initiatives as part of an international trend towards strengthening the democratic accountability of science (Durant, 1999; Joss, 1999). However, it should also be noted that the ideal of a deliberative, public dialogue has played a major part in the Danish social movement of folk high schools and the theological tradition inspired by N F S Grundtvig (1783–1872) (Knudsen, 2001; Korsgaard, 2004). What is implied in this tradition is that public debate is important in itself because it serves an edifying function (‘bildung’), forming an understanding of the individual and collective human condition.

The notion of public debate as a crucial vehicle for the creation of legitimate and viable solutions to technological and social controversies has played a crucial role in the institutionalisation of technology assessment in Denmark. In 1986 the Danish Board of Technology was founded in order to stimulate different processes of technology assessment, including broad public debate (www.tekno.dk). It is internationally known for its participatory consensus conferences, in which a panel of lay people solicits expert opinions on a particular topic of technological controversy and subsequently formulates a consensus report on how society should proceed (Andersen and Jørgen, 1999; Klüwer, 1995). In 1987, the Council of Ethics was formed as an advisory body in relation to new health-care technologies (www.etikskraad.dk). This body was designed as an expert committee but it was explicitly stated in its legislative foundation that it has an obligation to create, inspire and draw upon public debate. The Council of Ethics and the Board of Technology can be seen as an institutionalisation of the political ideal that consensus is to be reached through deliberation, and that it is important to involve actors with different kinds of knowledge (including lay people). According to this ideal, public debate is seen as the mechanism through which society as a whole can reflect on itself and decide whether a given social trend is desirable or not (for a theoretical account of a similar ideal, see Habermas (1991, 1987))

It is nevertheless possible to identify a paradox within the Danish tradition of public debate. The more public debate there has been, for instance about foetal diagnostics, the more it has seemed to be in demand (Lund and Horst, 1999). And the more it has been praised for its bottom-up qualities, the more it has been orchestrated as a top-down process through such institutions as the Board of Technology and the Council of Ethics. The continuous presence of demands for public debate could be taken to indicate limits to the ability to reach legitimate closure through societal self-reflection in the public sphere (Irwin, 2006). Furthermore, it seems that although public debate appears to be valued as a democratic institution of legitimacy, there is no unanimous
agreement on the specific definition of public debate or criteria for its social performance. It seems that public debate is an object of controversy in itself. It is on this basis that it is relevant to analyse the performativity (Law and Urry, 2004) of the ideal of public debate. Rather than being a medium through which controversies unfold, public debate is a performing phenomenon. The focus of this analysis is accordingly on this performativity: what does the public debate do?

In order to be able to explore this notion of public debate as a performing phenomenon, the paper has been inspired by Bruno Latour and actor network theory. In this perspective the laboratory can be seen as a technology which allows the researcher to construct facts (Latour, 1987). Even though the public sphere is a much less controllable space than the scientific laboratory, it is possible to imagine public debate as a kind of laboratory in which political actors explore what, in a given situation, can be defined as socially acceptable and legitimate. Acceptability is not a pre-defined characteristic. Rather it is seen as a result of a public process in the same way that the scientific fact is the result of the work in the laboratory. To say that a political decision about stem cell research is socially acceptable is therefore an outcome of a process of negotiation in the ‘public laboratory’.

Public opinion formation, in this context, is defined as a continuous production of propositions. Public opinion, on a topic such as acceptability of stem cell research, can be understood as particular shapings, or forms, in this fluid medium. The identification of such shapes is based on observations of stable relationships between propositions (Callon, 1991). Acceptability is hence defined as a pattern of positive associations in the constant stream of propositions. In principle all propositions can be connected to each other, but in practice it is only some associations which are seen to be possible and meaningful. And the observation of such stable patterns of association is equivalent to the identification of public opinion.

In studying these stable relations between propositions, I have chosen to focus on the concept of ‘representation’. To represent something in a process of decision-making is to construct an actant (Latour, 1991: 122), which speaks on its behalf. This could be a human being functioning as a spokesperson, but the function of actant is not restricted to humans. Nonhumans such as concepts, interests, principles etc. can also be constructed as actants of representation or, as I will call them here: representants. A representant is an actant which is representing something or someone, which should be heard or taken into account in the policy process regarding stem cell research. This could be a patient, who speaks on behalf of a group of patients with hopes for cures based on embryonic stem cell research but also a moral norm, which stipulates that a human must never solely be used as a means to an end. Against this background the performativity of public debate can be observed by analysing how representants are constructed and how stable patterns of positive association evolve between them.

The stem cell policy process

To understand the performativity of public opinion formation, the relevant empirical material stems from a number of different sources, including the legislative process in parliament, the formal hearings, the interventions by different advisory bodies and the public debate as it unfolded in the mass media. The data therefore consisted of policy documents from parliament and advisory bodies (the Council of Ethics and the Board of Technology) and mass-mediated discourse about stem cells during the policy process from 1 October 2002 to 31 May 2003. The material is representative of public debate in the sense of ‘opinions put forward in public’, but not in the sense of ‘opinions held by the Danish public in general’ (although several actors refer to a representant called ‘public opinion’).

Based on this material, the beginning of the policy process can be dated as October 2002 when an expert committee issued a report about future prospects regarding genetic technology. The report argued that stem cell research was a particularly promising field of research and that governmental restrictions ought to be lifted, so that embryonic stem cell research would be permitted in Denmark. This led to parliamentary calls for ‘broad public debate’ that could serve as a basis for policy decisions (Danish Parliament 29 November 2002). The Board of Technology was consequently commissioned to arrange a one-day hearing in January 2003. After another round of public hearings, the first bills were introduced on 2 April 2003 and were passed into law on 27 May 2003. The content of this bill was a change in legislation in order to permit stem cell research on ‘spare’ embryos from fertility treatment after 1 September 2003. The law did not permit the creation of embryos for the sole purpose of research.

As the following analysis will demonstrate, the character of ‘representants’ seems to have changed in the course of the policy process, thereby changing the entire framing of the controversy regarding stem cell research. In the beginning of the policy process the representants were primarily constructed as fundamental and abstract principles, i.e. in order to discuss the regulation of stem cell research it was constructed as important to consider basic principles about the status of the human embryo. This type of representation had precedence in official policy documents and early discussions in the Danish parliament. In later discussions in parliament as well as in the media, however, the representants were primarily constructed as human actors characterised by specific interests in the issue. In the following, I will illustrate the representation of principles and the
representation of interests separately in order to explicate the difference between them. This will lead on to a discussion of the way these differences imply two different framings of the controversy and consequently two different notions of how to solve the controversy.

Representation of principles

The representation of principles is prevalent in the expert committee’s report from 2002 (Gene Technology Committee), which was also the policy document that brought the issue of stem cell research explicitly onto the policy agenda. In this report, the conflict regarding stem cell research was described as a tension between, on the one hand, science and economic development which offers hope for the future, and, on the other hand, ethics which urges caution (Gene Technology Committee, 2002: 38). Subsequently, the report translated this tension into a conflict between two basic positions: one that values the potential benefits higher than the wish to protect the human embryo, and one that puts the necessity of protecting human life above all else. Following this, the report states that:

For many people a subscription to one or the other of these overarching positions will determine their opinion on the use of embryonic stem cells for research (Gene Technology Committee, 2002: 43).

In this way the two positions are presented as embodying two fundamentally different principles and the political issue is a societal dilemma of choosing between them and their moral consequences:

Decision-making regarding embryonic stem cell research represents an ethical conflict, which presents society with a choice between two possibilities, which both have some unavoidable moral consequences and costs (Gene Technology Committee, 2002: 56).

Similarly, a report from the Council of Ethics published in early 2003 articulated the conflict about stem cell research as rooted in the general discussion about the moral status of the foetus (Council of Ethics, 2003a: 3). The council described four different viewpoints on this moral status, which are said to represent general attitudes to the problem. It is argued that clarification of these perspectives should be a help in the public effort to reach consensus on the issue of stem cell research (Council of Ethics, 2003a: 11), but the report does not make any attempts to prioritise between them. Consequently, the perspectives seem to represent general positions, or principles, regarding the status of the human embryo, which are more or less incompatible. In two other consultation papers from the Council of Ethics (2002, 2003b), however, the council linked particular members to particular ethical arguments, so that it was possible to distinguish between the ethical viewpoints of the majority and the minority of the council. As we shall see later, this distinction had significant consequences.

The final example of the representation of principles can be found in the parliamentary debate about regulation of stem cell research which took place on 28 November 2002. The main focus of this debate was on an extensive discussion of the status of the embryo. Should the fertilised egg be regarded as so worthy of protection that it outweighs all the possible positive effects of embryonic stem cell research? Proponents of stem cell research articulate the ‘egg’ as spare and ask ‘whether it is more unethical to destroy them than to use them for research’? (Negotiations in the Danish Parliament, 28 November 2002, F19-BEH1, 15.25). Opponents on the other hand articulate the egg as equal to a child:

It is human life; they contain all the elements needed to become a child. If you insert a spare embryo into a womb, it will turn into a child with 10 fingers, 10 toes, ears, nose, mouth with sucking reflex, hair and all. It turns into a small human child; - also the egg you call spare. (Negotiations in the Danish Parliament, 28 November 2002, F19-BEH1, 15.30)

Most of the speakers including government representatives, however, didn’t state a definite affinity to either side but articulated the necessity of taking a stand in the near future. Hence, they called for a broad public debate as the basis for a political decision in the spring of 2003, and this was also presented as official government policy, as indicated here by the minister for health:

I think this is a sensible way of doing things. This way we will take things in the proper order, rather than government settling on a decision without input from the public debate (Negotiations in the Danish Parliament, 28 November 2002, F19-BEH1, 15.10).

As mentioned, the parliamentary debate was extensive and covered a variety of aspects, but the focus was consistently represented as a choice between two different attitudes in an ethical conflict of values. Either the fertilized egg is equivalent to human life and the approval of stem cell research is hence a reification of human life, which will lead down a slippery slope. Or the fertilized egg is spare, in which case using it for research with the aim of developing new medical cures is preferable to throwing it in the waste basket. Each of the positions is described as universal, and thus the conflict was articulated as a question about which one of them should be regarded as the basic moral principle upon which regulation could be based. This was made
very clear by one of the opponents of stem cell research, when she claimed that government was trying to delay the decision by calling for more public debate:

Now the government is suggesting that the decision should be delayed once again. But both the Gene Technology Expert Committee and The Council of Ethics have clearly explained what it is all about. What the arguments for and the arguments against are. What the different technical things are. What the different materialities are. What we should decide about (Negotiations in the Danish Parliament, 28 November 2002, F19-BEH1, 16.00).

According to this articulation the conflict is a stable and universal disagreement between two different sets of arguments guided by two different ethical principles. There is no need to delay the decision by more public debate, since in the end it is down to the politicians to decide which of these two principles should have supremacy.

The common characteristic of all the previous examples was that the central representants were principles or ‘overarching ethical positions’, which were incommensurably juxtaposed. When deciding on the regulation of stem cell research it was these basic principles that were represented as essential to be ‘taken into account’. The controversy, however, thrived on the fact that they are mutually exclusive. It is not possible at the same time to give absolute supremacy to the life of the unborn child and to say that the benefits of stem cell research outweigh the moral problems of destroying spare embryos. The political decision was therefore presented as one of choosing either one or the other principle as the more fundamental. In this framing of the controversy, the politicians played a crucial role as the actor having to make this decision. Rather than solving the controversy, a political decision will have to be made, thereby disregarding the representants of one side of the controversy.

Representation of interests

The second form of representation emerged in the latter part of the parliamentary process as well as in the media coverage of the policy process. The public hearing arranged by the Board of Technology on 23 January 2003 was a decisive point in this regard (Biosam, 2003). The large majority of the questions raised by audience and politicians focused on specific dilemmas (rather than general principles), and possible conflicts of interests between various specified actors. The most commonly mentioned actors, portrayed as actants with a specific interest in the conflict, were: the embryo with a right to life, the stem cell researchers with an interest in personal prestige, patients with diabetes (or Parkinsons, Alzheimers or other conditions) and their hope for a treatment, infertile couples and their wish to have babies, the medical industry and its demand for profitability, orphan disease groups in danger of becoming more marginalised, the nation of Denmark and its interest in scientific and industrial innovation, and Danish society’s obligation to uphold a moral standard. Various possible conflicts of interest between these actors were outlined in the debate. Some were seen as conflicts of societal interests versus individual interest, such as a conflict between the societal aim to improve health care versus individual’s private economic interests. Others were described as conflicts between different individual interests, such as the embryo with an interest in life versus the people with diabetes.

The ministers of this country probably cannot avoid taking into account the fact that one of the heavy industrial players in Denmark, Novo Nordisk, says that “the train is about to leave the platform” and that we shouldn’t let this chance pass us by. (…) Much is pointing in the direction of stem cells as the next revolution within medicine – but nobody knows. If it works we should let the consideration of the already living and the suffering weigh heavier than a moral consideration of a very diminutive collection of cells, which barely can be seen and which mostly resemble the snot from cold noses (Information, 23 January 2003).

This paper argues that we can now identify a change in the articulation of the controversy regarding stem cell research. Instead of being a conflict between two moral principles, it became a conflict between different groups of actors with individual and opposing interests.
In this way an important relation emerged between industrial and public stem cell researchers, who are portrayed as holding the key to future cures if they were just to be permitted to use it, and patients suffering serious diseases, who were portrayed as having legitimate and sustainable expectations of future cures. One of the patients was a six-year old boy, Anders, whose father had been campaigning for the approval of stem cell research together with Novo Nordisk (for instance at a press meeting about stem cell research at Novo Nordisk, Hagedorn Research Institute, 18 November 2002). As a member of the audience in the public hearing in January, the father spoke of his son’s risk of late-onset complications of the diabetes, and the plea was later repeated in the media:

Injections will never be able to compete with healthy beta cells' ability to administer precisely the right amount of insulin to process the blood sugar. It would therefore be optimal if Anders could have some new beta cells, without his immune system killing them off again. It is precisely this biotechnological hook Finn Kristensen [the father] is now hanging his hopes on. The building block of hope is called stem cells (Berlingske Tidende, 17 April 2003).

The powerful relationship between stem cell researchers and actual patients is associated with the notion of the ‘spare’ embryo as a lump of cells, which would otherwise be thrown away. When the government finally issued its bill, it built upon this association in arguing that research on embryos was already legitimate in some circumstances and that the change in legislation was therefore only minor:

Health minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen (liberal party) thinks that the government has made a sober balancing between the considerations of the embryo on one hand and the possibility of curing serious diseases on the other hand: “Research on embryos is already allowed when the purpose is to improve methods of in vitro fertilisation. In light of the new possibilities for treating serious diseases we expand the law a little bit so medical research will be permitted. You have to remember that the alternative to research on spare embryos is that they will be thrown in the waste basket,” says Lars Løkke Rasmussen (Berlingske Tidende, 18 March 2003).

On the other side of the conflict we found the political party of the Christian Democrats and the minority in the Council of Ethics, who argue on behalf of the unborn life of the human embryo. In contrast to the earlier discussions, however, these actors were not articulated as representing a universal ethical principle, but rather as representing their own personal set of ethical preferences:

Not everyone is delighted about the law. A minority in The Council of Ethics is against using the fertilised eggs for research, and also the Christian Democrats are against utilising the eggs for other means than what they were created for: to create little new people (Politiken, 2 April 2003).

The important point about quotes like this is that the principled argument against destroying human life has been substituted with a reference to specific human actors, who reject the law. It is their personal structure of preferences which they represent in articulation, not a general ethical principle commonly accepted in society. In this context it is interesting that almost all the media articles written by journalists were positive towards stem cell research. Many of them mentioned the resistance towards the legalisation, but it was usually described in the last part of the article and it rarely took up more than a quarter of the entire article.

In general, the mass media coverage and later parliamentary debates suggested two networks of representation as summarised in Figure 1. Figure 1 illustrates how the network in favour of legalising embryonic stem cell research on the left-hand side was presented as a stronger alliance with more associated representants than the right-hand network. Towards the end of the policy process, it seemed that opposition to stem cell research was only supported by a few representants constructed as representing only their own individual moral preferences and the notion of a right to life on behalf of some unspecified unborn foetuses. In contrast, the network in favour of permitting stem cells represented a much stronger alliance including specific patients with hopes for future cures, industry (representing a profound impact on national prosperity) and stem cell researchers articulated as holding the key to future cures of serious diseases.

Implications for governance

The two types of representation presented in the two preceding sections have profound implications for the task of policy-making understood as efforts to solve the controversy. As mentioned, the first form framed the policy question as one of deciding between two mutually exclusive principles. Since the principles were both universal and incommensurable, choosing one of them as supreme meant disregarding the other. In the second form, representants had primarily the shape of human actors with various interests. In this form, the policy question was presented as one of mediation in order to balance the interests of various actors and find a working compromise. It was in this context that the difference in strength of the two networks became crucial. The representants who opposed the legalisation have become increasingly less associated and hence we
can say that they have become more dispensable compared to the representants in favour of legalisation, who have simultaneously become more indispensable (Latour, 1987: 119–120). The relative dispensability of the representants is here defined as equivalent to the length and strength of the networks they are associated with. The longer the networks, the more impossible it is to avoid taking the representants into account.

In order to exemplify this ‘becoming indispensable’ it is fruitful to consider a few examples of the construction of stable patterns of association around representants. One example is the creation of the ‘spare embryos’ as a representant. Through the many references to spare embryos as an entity which already has a physical existence on the shelves of the laboratories, ‘the spare embryo’ is created as an object which can be used for various purposes or thrown out: depending on the political decisions. As Svendsen and Koch (2007) have argued, Danish laboratory practice does not unproblematically sustain this clear categorisation of a ‘spare embryo’, but in the public debate this representant was created as a powerful alternative to ‘the unborn life’ of the fertilized egg. A similar example is found in the creation of hopes for future cures. In light of the work on the sociology of expectations (Brown et al., 2000) it is interesting to note that the expectations of future cures based on stem cell research are not based on very much substantial evidence. Rather, it seems to be the case that expectations in themselves constitute sufficient argumentative support for the call for a change of legislation. In this context it is noticeable how the boy Anders, as a specific patient, becomes a representant of patients as innocent victims. Through the personal stories of hopes and promises (similar to those reported by Petersen et al., 2005) and the pictures of a sweet kid, the abstract notion of patients suffering from disease transforms into a specific human actor with specific needs and interests.

It should also be noted how the ongoing articulation of propositions in public in itself became a kind of representant later in the process. This was particularly obvious with the public hearing arranged by the Board of Technology in January 2003. As noted earlier, the transcript from the hearing displays a very broad range of themes and arguments, but later references to the hearing seem to interpret this discursive diversity as a general expression of support. When the health care minister announced the proposed bill in March 2003, he made explicit reference to the hearing as having demonstrated wide public support, and none of the opponents openly questioned his statement. With regard to the general interest in public deliberation on science and technology it is worth noting how the stories about deliberative exercises have a life of their own. Subsequent recounts of the outcomes do not necessarily have a straightforward relation to the actual deliberations undertaken. In the present context, however, the important point is not whether the minister’s interpretation of the hearing was justified, but the fact that the diverse propositions put forward on the day of the hearing were subsequently translated into a coherent statement of public support for a change of legislation. In this sense the process of public deliberation also created representants, which influenced subsequent articulation.

Summing up, the paper has explored the construction of different types of representants, human as well as nonhuman, in order to discuss the performative public debate. The argument of the paper is that different framings of representation in the public debate shape the task of political decision-making. Two different ways of framing representation have been identified in the empirical analysis: representation of principles and representation of interests. The performative function of each of these framings becomes explicit if we consider how their inherent models of problem-solving and governance differ.
substantially. In the first form the public debate is described as a means to find the right decision with regard to the two contradictory ethical principles: Which one of them should have supremacy? In this way we can speak of a hierarchical model of governance, where the central question for politicians is to determine which basic principle should be guiding the hierarchical order.

In contrast the second form can be seen as a mediatory model of governance, where the central objective of politicians is to mediate between different actors with individual interests in order to determine how the best compromise can be assembled. The shift from the hierarchical to a mediatory model can be viewed as a simplification, because it makes compromise possible. In the hierarchical model of governance, it seemed impossible to decide between the two principles. But the shift to a mediatory model framed the policy issue as one of balancing different interests through negotiation hereby trying to reach for a pragmatic compromise.

In light of the particular Danish ideal of public deliberation and dialogue, it is tempting to interpret this change in framing with a certain degree of nostalgic longing for a time or place when political decisions were taken by politicians and citizens guided by common values or general principles. The story line of this analysis certainly fits with accounts of Danish political culture as moving towards a more market-oriented political model where citizens are no longer asked to consider the common good, but rather addressed as consumers of politics in exercising their democratic functions. However, it must be acknowledged that in the case of stem cell regulation it did not seem possible to reach a compromise based on discussion of universal principles. Only after the objective of policy making became re-framed as a question of mediating between interests was it possible to reach a compromise. Whether this signals a common change away from consensual politics in Denmark is beyond the scope of this paper. Simultaneously, it is an open question whether the change from representation of principles to the representation of interests, in general, is a precondition for closure on controversial science policy issues in other national contexts.

In this context, it is noteworthy, that the mediatory model of governance seems to be more inclusive than the hierarchical model. Varied forms of representants can be articulated as relevant, just as an increasing number of issues can be taken into account, thereby making the game of negotiation complex and unpredictable. And this complex negotiation is making the performative effect of public debate visible. The continuous process of public articulation is seen as serving the function of making some representations increasingly stable and indispensable. Many efforts of constructing representants might be made, but they do not all become stabilised and indispensable by association with other representants. In fact, the opposite is true. Over time, a pattern is stabilised in which not everything can be made relevant, just as there are limits as to which representants will be articulated as indispensable. In this way, public debate serves as a place for testing out associations with regard to politically legitimate decisions. In the laboratory of public debate, actors can explore what can be constructed as socially acceptable and legitimate.

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