

Public Attitudes Toward Science

Whether we like it or not, the world we live in has changed a great deal in the last hundred years, and it is likely to change even more in the next hundred. Some people would like to stop these changes and go back to what they see as a purer and simple age. But as history shows, the past was not that wonderful. It was not so bad for a privileged minority, though even they had to do without modern medicine, and childbirth was highly risky for women. But for the vast majority of the population, life was nasty and short.

Anyway, even if one wanted to, one couldn't put the clock back to an earlier age. Knowledge and techniques can't just be forgotten. Nor can one prevent further advances in the future. Even if all government money for research were cut off, the force of competition would still bring about advances in technology. Moreover, one cannot stop inquiring minds from thinking about basic science, whether or not they were paid for it.

If we accept that we cannot prevent science and technology from changing our world, we can at least try to ensure that the changes they make are in the right directions. In a democratic society, this means that the public needs to have a basic understanding of science.

What can be done to harness this interest and give the public the scientific background it needs to make informed decisions on subjects like acid rain, the greenhouse effect, nuclear weapons, and genetic engineering? Clearly, the basis must lie in what is taught in schools.

—Stephen Hawking

(出自 Select Readings)