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Photo: Einar Nilsen

Research exists to shed light on the world. Politics is to use this light to set a direction. Therefore, political abuse of research is dangerous.

## Drunks and lamp-posts

«Research shows that quite often, parents and families are the ones who send their children out on hazardous journeys. Documentation from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Fafo report from 2014 respectively, as well as a survey based on interviews with 30 unaccompanied minors under 15 years made by the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo, reveal that the children rarely choose to set out on these hazardous journeys of their own volition. In other words, children are largely forced to become refugees, and they are often put under pressure to send money back to their families.»

This was written by Sylvi Listhaug, Minister of Immigration and Integration, on the NRK Ytring web forum on 5 April 2016 (1). The problem was that no report on this topic had been published by Fafo in 2014, and the other research referred to had in no way shown what Listhaug claimed. «Manifestly wrong use» and «brings research into disrepute» said the researchers involved (2). Listhaug dismissed the criticism. In the *Politisk kvarter* broadcast on NRK1 radio she refused to answer any questions regarding what research results she had used to arrive at these allegations (3).

Ole Petter Ottersen, Rector of the University of Oslo, did not mince his words in a response in the *Aftenposten* daily. «It was simply painful to listen to her attempts to explain away the matter,» he wrote (4). Moreover, with reference to the recent attempts by Per Sandberg, Minister of Fisheries, to instruct the researchers at the Institute of Marine Research, he asked rhetorically whether a pattern is starting to emerge in the government's abuse of research results (4).

This is not the first time Minister Listhaug has been accused of abusing research to support her own conclusions. As recently as January 2016, UNICEF sent a letter of complaint to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security after Listhaug had used a UN report to justify a tightening of the asylum regulations. Her statements gave «an incorrect account of the content of the report,» UNICEF wrote (5).

Political abuse of research is old news. This phenomenon is of course known from dictatorial regimes, where the definition of truth is decided by the state. For example, «bourgeois pseudo-science» was the expression used to denigrate research disciplines that were incompatible with the policies of the former Soviet state, such as genetics (6). However, even in Western democracies research is abused for political purposes. Examples abound. One of the best known stems from the United States: in 2004, more than 9000 American scientists, including 49 Nobel Prize laureates, signed a petition that accused the Bush administration of comprehensive abuse and misinterpretation of research data for purposes of adapting them to political ends (7). According to the research journalist Chris Mooney, the republicans have a long tradition for systematic abuse of research – from the Nixon presidency to the current denial of anthropogenic climate change (8). In Europe, David Cameron's government previously defended one of the numerous and controversial British

healthcare reforms with reference to a highly doubtful interpretation of research data (9). Here in the Nordic countries, the wolf researcher Guillaume Chapron has spoken out against the conservative Swedish government's abuse of his research results (10). Finally, here in Norway a recent research article shows that politicians are selectively picking research results that support their respective viewpoints and strategies for influencing decisions on the licensing hours for serving alcohol (11).

Of course, politicians are fully entitled to choose to use research or disregard it, because research results are rarely of a neutral nature. They are influenced by the choice of methodology, the researcher's prejudices, the choice of analytical method and the researcher's interpretation of the findings, to mention but a few. These issues are elementary in terms of theory of science as well as in practice, and are only one reason why no topic ever will be «completely» studied. It is equally elementary that if references to research are made, they must be correct and dispassionate. Direct misquotes, «cherry picking» and deliberate misinterpretation of results are abuse, and remain so. Such abuse is dangerous, because the role of research is to shed light on reality. This is the light that politicians should use to set directions on our behalf.

The Scottish author Andrew Lang (1884–1912) is attributed with the expression: «Politicians use statistics in the same way that a drunk uses lamp-posts – for support rather than illumination» (12). In an increasingly complex and confusing world, we need politicians that behave soberly in the face of research, not like drunks.

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