

Liberal Democrat Science Policy

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Current Liberal Democrat science policy stems from concerns that over the past hundred years Britain has fallen behind international competitors in some areas of the scientific and industrial fields. It would be easy to make a case for more Government investment but there are some more fundamental problems which have to be tackled if Science is to become more prominent in public thinking and regard.

The National Curriculum was introduced in the eighties and for the first time ever there was a guarantee that all children would study science at school. In a perfect world this should have meant that more children would become enthused by science and seek a career in one of the science based areas. Sadly, this does not appear to have been the case.

There needs to be an urgent review of science teaching in schools so that we understand why children, particularly girls, decide not to study science at Advanced level. For some children the reason could be as simple as choosing “an easier option” but, fundamentally, we need to answer the basic question, “Is our science teaching good enough?”

There is some evidence that science teaching may not be good enough as there is a shortage of science teachers and a large number of children are taught by someone without appropriate qualifications. The Liberal Democrats have set aside funding to ensure that teachers receive appropriate training in the subject they are teaching.

Unless our brightest and best young people opt for science as a career then

we will lose further ground. Liberal Democrats believe that the Government’s current proposals for tuition fees and top up fees run counter to this aim. Many scientists are not well paid and the prospect of future debt means that future careers are chosen with earning power in mind.

In the near future Universities will have to devote a lot of time and attention to the problem of how they will fund bursaries. If this burden is lifted from them then they will be able to devote that time and energy to attracting more funding for research projects.

If we are to provide the scientists and the teachers for the next generation we have to reverse the diminishing science base in our Universities. It is of great concern that 79 science and engineering departments have closed down over the past six years, at a time when the higher education sector is expanding.

The Liberal Democrats will disband the DTI but this does not mean abolishing all of its functions. Science would transfer to a newly reformed Department of Education and Science.

More importantly, the Liberal Democrats will not cut the existing level of the science budget. The contribution made by the DTI will grow in real terms by 0.5% each year over the next Parliament. This will allow targeted public and private science and innovation spending to be regularly and thoroughly monitored for best practice.

We do not believe that existing Government plans for large increases in science subsidies to the private

sector are sensible, since they are badly targeted and will often simply replace private sector investment in science, at the taxpayer’s expense.

The structure of British R&D is different from that of our Continental trading partners. We share a desire to raise research and development expenditure as a part of GDP but believe that full account should be taken of the contribution from the private sector, UK multinational companies and our investments overseas especially in the USA.

In addition to this we need to consider whether our current research priorities are the right ones. Do we have the right balance between military R&D or should more money be diverted towards civil science and research? One thing is sure, in line with our “green” credentials we would want to prioritise research into climate change mitigations and cleaner production and consumption techniques.

Scientific developments create ethical challenges for any Government. In recent years there have been a number of highly emotive issues such as stem cell research and GM crops. There will be more in the future. The media delights in scaremongering and politicians of all parties have jumped on these bandwagons. The Liberal Democrats would like to see reasoned debate but on a private level I would contend that the lack of understanding of science in politics and the media fuels this anti-science feeling. I return to where I started in this article. There are so many reasons why improving science education will reap dividends in the long run.