

Eating with the P and S

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Douglas Naysmith has asked me to reminisce, as Father of the House of Commons and as a Parliamentary and Scientific Committee "Regular" for over 43 years.

The first meeting I attended was one day after I took my seat! Encouraged by the Chairman, Austin Albu, MP for Edmonton, an engineer himself, I went along to listen to H J B Harding and J P Pain make a presentation on "Technical considerations relating to the Channel Tunnel and Channel Bridge". You may laugh now, but some of us concluded that a whole bridge or a half bridge-half tunnel was more feasible than a tunnel!

The two following meetings that first summer have stuck in my memory. Drs H G Sanders, T A Lloyd Davies and Donald Hunter came to us on the subject of the diseases arising out of the use of new materials and processes in industry and agriculture. This was of considerable constituency use to me, as the information gleaned meant that I was taken far more seriously than most politicians by the managers of firms employing my constituents, BP Chemicals in Grangemouth, the Atlas Steel Foundry in Armadale, and a host of others. Among those most interested in the subject – I had made copious notes – was Bill Hewlett, then setting up Hewlett-Packard in Queensferry in my constituency. As a member of PSAC – the President's Science Advisory

Council – he invited me to see him in Washington, which I did, and meet the American Scientific Establishment of the day, Glenn Seaborg, George Kwistiakowsky, Dan Hornig, Ed Wenk and others. Directly and indirectly the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee has opened many doors to me.

The second and seminal meeting of that summer was when, just before the recess, the distinguished engineer, S A Ghalib, friend of Lord Gregson (President 1986-89), Sir William Cook, and Colonel G W Raby came on the issue of "Atomic energy: recent developments and future prospects". Seminal not only for me, but for the distinguished electrical engineer, Arthur Palmer (Chairman 1965-67), who decided as the Founder-Chairman of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, to embark as our first task on the inquiry into Nuclear Power. The Labour Members of the Select Committee were Palmer, David Ginsburg (Dewsbury), who became Chairman of the P and S (1968-1970), Dr Nick Davies (Stretford), Lecturer in Physics at the Langworthy Laboratory in the University of Manchester, Bryan Parkyn (Bedford), Chemical Engineer and businessman, Dr David Owen (Plymouth) and I. The Conservatives had Sir Harry Legge-Bourke, later long-term Chairman of the 1922 Committee, Sir David Price, Chairman of the P and S 1979-81, and Airey Neave



(Abingdon), later to be tragically murdered. The Liberal was Eric Lubbock (Orpington), engineer, now Lord Avebury.

In those days, Commander Christopher Powell, secretary of the Committee, and lobbyist, would be disappointed if at least 20 MPs and a phalanx of Peers, led by the ever-kindly Earl of Halsbury FRS (President 1963-65) did not turn up.

So much for my first 6 months as an MP!

In the following year, I remember hearing Sir Frederick Brundrett and Sir Owen Wansbrough-Jones outline the role of Science and Government; Abdus Salam FRS, of Imperial College, later to win a Nobel Prize, on the application of science and technology in less developed areas; Dr E G Cox FRS, on Science and Agriculture, who invited us a fortnight later to go to East Malling Research Centre, where a lovely lunch and unparalleled fresh cherries off the tree made an impression, etched on our minds; and Dick Stone, Fellow of King's Cambridge, on "The use of computers in economic investigation".

The Science Minister of the day was the Lord President of the Council, Quintin Hogg. His Parliamentary Secretary, Denzil Freeth, in our eyes a possible future Prime Minister. Science was important before the White Heat of the Technological Revolution!

A feature of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee has been the 7.30-9.30 "working dinner" after the formal evening seminar, usually held in the Astor Suite at 1 Parliament Street. Not only have they been congenial, but highly educative as far as I am concerned.

I am told that I have had more Oral Questions answered over 43 years than anyone in the history of Parliament. Many of them originated either from the discussion with guests over dinner – visiting speakers sang for their supper – or in conversations with a neighbour at the meal. For example, I was first told of the importance of Aldabra Atoll, an

ecological jewel in the Indian Ocean, by Sir Ashley Miles FRS (Biological Secretary and Vice-President of The Royal Society 1963-68), whom I had the good fortune to sit next to in 1967. Had it not been for that chance encounter at the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, I would never have asked 70 Parliamentary Questions, and sent them to eight leading Americans, including Vice-President Hubert Humphrey whom I had met in Washington when I was a guest of the Bureau of the Budget. He went to Robert MacNamara, Secretary of Defense, who in turn went to Lyndon Johnson, as did Dillon Ripley, who

exercised his right as Secretary of the Smithsonian to go direct to Lyndon Johnson. Lyndon Johnson asked Harold Wilson what Aldabra was all about. The idea of a British runway died an instant death. Had it not been for the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee dinner the home of the pink-footed booby, the flightless rail and the giant tortoise in the Indian Ocean would have been destroyed for ever.

I have a huge debt to the Committee for bringing me together with scientists and industrialists, whom I would never otherwise have had the chance of meeting, and who greatly enriched my knowledge and understanding.