

A call to arms...

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Britain's future depends more than ever before on the success of our scientists, technologists and engineers. Historically, our influence in the world and our prosperity have always been greatest when we have stretched and exploited our intellectual and skills-based advantages in these fields of human endeavour.

It was neither the language of Shakespeare, nor our constitutional and legal arrangements, nor our Westminster model of democracy that caused the people from a group of small islands to rule an empire on which the sun never set and which became the fourth largest economy in the world. No, our global industrial and military might and wealth depended on our pre-eminence in science and engineering and on our financial acumen.

At the start of the twenty-first century we observe electronic engineering and manufacturing processes growing most strongly in China and the Pacific Rim, British university science departments closing, "hard" science subjects struggling in schools and universities because they are "more difficult" than new soft options. Bioscience companies and the research they sponsor are being forced to leave our country in the face of political extremism. All this, while our economy is increasingly dependent on wallowing in our past and on imported energy that we hope will see us through.

It need not be like this. It must not be like this. Parliamentarians can take a lead and make a difference. Of course, neither individual MPs or Peers, nor our Parties, nor the Government will all agree on policies as diverse and ethically difficult as human reproductive technology, energy sourcing, nanotechnology, genetic modification, or climate change. But there are two key ways in which Parliament can promote informed public debate and help our Government and our nation reach sensible policy conclusions.

For one romantic moment, I invite you to set aside the motives of the Party Whips in helping us decide how to vote (for they only act on orders and there is an urgent need to change the timid way all our political parties handle "science"). The truth is that very few of us go through the division lobbies with fully-developed intellectual analyses on the tips of our tongues, eager to justify our votes on stem-cell research or GM crops to our local papers and radio stations.

Along the way we will have been lobbied by postcard campaigns and Early Day Motions promoted by self-justifying single-issue pressure groups and perhaps by a score of serious constituents acting from deep conviction. Please spare me the MPs who tell us their postbags have been groaning with hundreds of letters supporting the way they will vote anyway! I think only once in 23 years have I had more than 100 personal letters about any issue at all, including abortion and the Iraq war.

The first thing each of us can do in debating policy options, in scrutinising legislation and in deciding how to vote is to understand and to properly assess risk. You don't have to be a scientist to do that. But it makes a mockery of science and of logic if we ignore or distort the nature of risk. Is anything at all risk-free? I doubt it. Yet gullible public opinion and understandable prejudice are easily led by tabloid headlines and focus groups. But who is sillier – the consumer who won't shop at a supermarket if they sell GM food or Governments who tell us food containing up to 0.9% GM ingredients is "GM-free"?

Our second mission must be to ensure that policy is based on evidence – for science is politically neutral. Where an issue is overlain by moral or ethical considerations (as in the case of human reproductive technology) the decision on where to draw the line should be taken by Parliament as a whole, not by the loudest pressure groups nor by Whitehall Ministers. To be pro-science is not to be anti-green any more than good Greens are anti-science. Yet that is too often the assumption in the UK – but not, it seems, in Finland or France (new nuclear power stations) or the USA (commonplace GM products), where science is still respected and debate more rational. Are we Brits really any different? What has gone wrong? It is time for British politicians to take a lead, not run for cover when science is on the agenda.

Robert Key has been Conservative MP for Salisbury (which includes Porton Down) since 1983. He served in the Governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. In the last Parliament he was a Member of the Science & Technology Select Committee and until the 2005 General Election he was Shadow Science Minister. He is now a Member of the Defence Select Committee.