Blair Praises "Thriving" Links Day

The PM speaking from the podium at Links Day

On Wednesday 22nd June the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, praised the Royal Society of Chemistry's Parliamentary Links Day as a "thriving all-party occasion" which he had been "delighted to attend" during exchanges in the Chamber of the House of Commons at Prime Minister's Questions.

The day before the Prime Minister had attended the annual Parliamentary Links Day in Parliament which was co-hosted by Dr Brian Iddon MP and Dr Andrew Murrison MP.

The theme was Science and the G8 Agenda which concentrated on the Government's twin priorities of Climate Change and Africa at the G8 Summit.

"Science will be particularly important in dealing with killer diseases in Africa," said Mr Blair at the Despatch Box "and the science and technology behind dealing with climate change is also crucial."

He added: "That is why it is so important that science forms a strong part of what we do in the G8" and on this point all the UK science community agreed with him.

PM's Unprecedented Appearance

The Prime Minister's appearance at Links Day, introduced by Dr Brian Iddon MP, was unprecedented and the Attlee Suite was overflowing with MPs, Peers and scientists.

Dr Iddon thanked the RSC for its leadership role in Parliament and observed that no sitting Prime Minister had addressed such an audience of Parliamentarians, scientists and engineers in the House itself in a generation. From the very start it was standing room only.

For his part the Prime Minister praised Links Day calling it "the foremost scientific gathering in the Parliamentary calendar." He added:

"This theme you have chosen for this year – the contribution of science and engineering to our policy priorities at the G8 Summit in Gleneagles – could not be more timely. These two issues are, as you know, very important to me and to the government. But most of the problems faced by modern governments cannot be solved by governments alone. Tackling these issues also depends crucially on you: our scientists and engineers."

The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for International Development

Science and Engineering Working Together

The Prime Minister's acceptance of the invitation to attend Links Day was recognition of the importance that this Parliamentary event now has for science and engineering.

The growing success of Links Day has enabled the most important scientific societies in the UK to work closer together. The Prime Minister himself recognised this when he thanked the RSC's "partner organisations".

Speakers this year came from the Institute of Physics, the Institute of Biology, the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Royal Society of Chemistry. Other organisations that have always given strong support to the event include the Campaign for Science and Engineering [CaSE].

"Science Teachers of the Year" Awards

The Prime Minister also presented awards to "teachers of the year" in physics, biology and chemistry to highlight their vital role:

"It is our teachers on whom we depend for inspiring, encouraging and training the next generation of scientists. Progress now depends on knowledge to a degree unmatched in any previous era. Unless we reward and value the people who transfer knowledge from one generation to the next we will suffer the consequences in declining prosperity. And that is why I am delighted to be here, to recognise the excellent work that you have done."

The Prime Minister's contribution to Links Day followed that of the Secretary of State for International Development, the Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, and preceded contributions from the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir David King, the Minister for Science and Innovation, Lord Sainsbury of Turville, and other distinguished scientists and engineers.

The Political and Scientific Contributions

In his keynote address Mr Benn spoke about the partnership of scientists and policymakers in the fight against poverty and disease – especially in Africa – and described some of the initiatives being pioneered by the Department for International Development. He paid tribute to the role of Dr Ian Gibson MP's Select Committee in the establishment of a Chief Scientific Adviser at DfID.

Mr Benn also emphasised the role of science in solving the problems that humanity faced and DfID's key role in building up the scientific capacity of countries to deal with them and concluded that the G8 represented a real opportunity to make progress.

RSC President Dr Simon F Campbell drew attention to the terrible death toll from malaria (which far exceeds HIV/AIDS) and drew on his direct personal experience as Chair of the Expert Scientific Advisory Panel of the Medicines for Malaria Venture which had built up a strong R&D portfolio of over 20 drug projects involving academic and industry partners.

The succeeding series of scientific presentations was begun by Professor Alan Thorpe, chief executive of the Natural Environment Research Council, speaking on behalf of the Institute of Physics. With 40 years' experience of weather models, he said, it can now be demonstrated unequivocally that the climate changes that have occurred can only be accounted for by including human activity and it is the developed world that has caused this problem. He said global warming in the first part of the 20th Century was mainly attributable to solar variation whereas in the latter part it was mainly due to increasing CO_2.

He was followed by Professor Monique Simmonds from the Institute of Biology who described the vital role of PROTA (Plant Resources of Tropical Africa) and other seed bank initiatives carried out at Kew Gardens. Examples of potential research and environmental applications include the loss of biodiversity in the dry sands of South Africa, and restoration following the impacts of mining in tropical West Africa where a detailed knowledge of plants is needed to help reclaim the land.

Dr Stephen Cox, Executive Secretary of the Royal Society, explained the joint initiative taken by national science academies of all the G8 nations (and other key countries like India) entitled "Joint science academies statement: Global response to climate change" which advocated the building up of scientific capacity, especially in Africa, to train its own scientists

and technologists and build its own scientific equipment.

Professor Ian Fells, speaking on behalf of the Royal Academy of Engineering, pointed out that by 2023, under present arrangements, there will be only one nuclear power station left in the UK. He made a robust contribution to the morning session advocating a nuclear component to the UK energy mix (as outlined in the Energy White Paper) as well as an increased emphasis on renewables as part of a concerted effort in CO_2 reduction. Concluding the scientific presentations Dr Andrea Jackson of the Royal Society of Chemistry and the University of Leeds used current research to describe the complexities of the carbon cycle in nature.

Sir David King concluded with a survey of the scientific debate on climate change and the narrowing areas of scientific uncertainty on the key issue of global warming caused by human activity and outlined the evolving process of international discussion on climate change – of which the July G8 summit was only one part. The February 2005 conference at the Hadley Centre in Exeter demonstrated a large number of environmental impacts, such as plankton blooms, loss of cod off Scotland, and acidification of the oceans. The high temperatures from the 1940s and 1950s are now our average summer values. Climate change creates further stress, such as life expectancy in Africa, which already has the lowest life expectancy in the world. And it is possible that climate change poses a greater threat to wildlife in Africa than poaching. Sir David also urged all scientific societies to work with the Chief Scientific Officers across Government Departments and with the Select Committees.

Dr Andrea Jackson, the Royal Society of Chemistry

Sir David King, Chief Scientific Adviser

Dr Andrew Murrison MP, in winding up, praised the positive impact of such a high profile Parliamentary Links Day and the large number of MPs who had already signed Early Day Motion 328 which noted "the Society's continuing commitment to serve the public interest" by improving the access of all MPs to scientific information and a better understanding of science which its pioneering Parliamentary Link Scheme had been set up over 20 years ago to provide.

Meanwhile the scientists and engineers at this year's Links Day showed that they stand ready to help deliver the solutions needed to fulfil the ambitious G8 Agenda.