

The Budget Highlights Science

Dr Ian Gibson MP

And so it has come to pass that science, technology and engineering have been highlighted for action in the recent budget speech delivered by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. There is at last a real language of science in the document entitled “Science and innovation investment framework 2004-2014: next steps”. It emphasises again the need for academics and business to interact but there is an obvious frustration here in that lip service has been paid to it before. Academics are caught in the process of the Research Assessment Exercise which, from reading between the lines, is on its last legs (another victory for the Science and Technology Select Committee 2001-2005). The assessment and the money attached to success must recognise that the Arts play in a different league as far as grants and research are conceived. The time must have come where industry, perhaps through an independent University fund, increases the money available for Scientific Research, without the stigma attached to such research when a project is funded by an individual industry. This may allow more money from taxes to be available for Arts. This could represent real industrial/academic collaboration with peer review still applying, ensuring that industry does not solely dictate research avenues. At the same time joint research projects could be encouraged within a political science strategy.

The document from four Government Departments features heavily on innovation but misses

out on explaining the various stages required to progress from lab to social application. It requires ideas, youthful vigour and enthusiasm and encouragement to ensure progress and delivery of results. If our science education process at school encouraged science as a career based on some stability of employment, then we could be ecstatic. If laboratory experimental work was encouraged at school and if it became the major component of school and university training in practical modern laboratories, then our confidence for building science into the national psyche would grow. There are eddy currents in this area but not a tidal wave or even a crusade.

The Chancellor’s document neglects mentioning public interaction with the advance of science in Britain, which we want to attain. More Science Cities would galvanise the Science, Technology and Engineering Community, encouraging many different activities and not just academic science. Communities could discuss the science of climate change and temperature increase, and health research from genetics to care. Maybe the Chancellor thinks there are too many branches doing public understanding already and we need to rationalise the process of public participation. I wonder often how much scientists care about this dimension. It may only be a token gesture of the scientific community immersing themselves in an issue, without really seeing the necessity of dialogue.

The Chancellor has bravely combined a Research Council and a



Department of Health section who both tackle serious issues of health research into a merged financial unit which can concentrate on the delivery of services like clinical trials. There is more yet to be done in the structural organisation of our science base, which I believe will ensure a slicker, sharper workforce with some stable future. I bet the ball is now rolling and more restructuring will follow. Are scientists in the mood to reorganise themselves? The current think-tank for science, technology and engineering, which I am helping to set up, is going to help in setting a visionary agenda. Whilst groupings in Parliament are mostly reactive to some problem, the need for an organisation to set a national strategy with clear aims is essential. We aim to launch in July and September in separate events. Science has reached the political radar screen as part of government’s mainstream initiatives and will stay there. It has an influence on so many policies and will feature predominantly in promoting an evidence base which guides policy for the future. Short-termism is not suitable for science policy. The Parliamentary and Scientific Committee will play a major role in elaborating science policy over the next months, of that I am sure.