SCIENCE AND POLICY

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The intersection of science and policy has many faces. It might be the way in which public misperceptions of the risks of MMR now threaten the outbreak of a disease which we thought had been safely contained – measles; it might be how well informed the arguments about the commissioning of a new wave of nuclear power stations are; it might be about whether resources for research in science generally, or in specific areas are adequate; it might be….and so on. The list is long and each example is important.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology has proved itself over the years to be able to make significant contributions to these debates. Fortunately, the remit given to it is wide. Essentially, however, its focus is upon developments which require detailed assessment of our national understanding and capability in both science and technology.

This has two main aspects to it: the first is the detailed scrutiny of policy which is dependent upon or is influenced by developments in science and technology – for example we have just embarked upon a study of the impact of the development of various nanotechnologies upon food safety (to be chaired by Lord Krebs). For this, the main focus of the inquiry will be a detailed assessment of relevant technologies both in this country and elsewhere (for example the USA) and their potential benefits and possible risks.

The second is less sharp in outline, but not less precise in outcomes. One example is a report published over two years ago on Science and Ageing. The focus there was the emphasis, or lack of it, on our capacity as a nation to mobilise the various strengths we have in scientific research to prepare for the massive demographic shifts taking place in the UK and elsewhere, in both developed and developing countries. One outcome has been a significant shift in emphasis in setting budgets and priorities in both Research Councils and in relevant charities.

A separate and rather different example of the exercise of influence on Government and other sector awareness of developments in science and technology, was the report chaired by Lord Broers on Personal Internet Security, published in July 2007. The Government response shared one characteristic with the report on Science and Ageing – it was wholly inadequate.

In each case the subsequent debate in the House of Lords illustrated the core of the problem. What is apparent to the members of the Committee, but not always, evidently, to the Government, is that developments in science and technology do not confine themselves within Cabinet and Civil Service demarcations of policy boundaries. The Government response in each case was effectively a scissors and paste job of comments from a variety of Departments each separately and individually evaluating a specific recommendation or comment. The one noticeable feature was lack of (to use an apparently almost deceased phrase) 'joined-up Government'. Thus the loss of personal data from at least three different Departments (Treasury, Defence and Health) within weeks of us being reassured that all was in hand, was not even considered as a possible generic problem. The complacency, as became apparent in the autumn of 2007, was breath-taking.

I am happy to record that since then a further evidence session with two Ministers – Vernon Coker and Baroness Vadera – has moved things on, and that there is now a regular exchange of reporting letters between the Minister now holding overall responsibility and the Committee.

These examples illustrate well the working pattern of the Committee and the context of the interaction between science and policy within which its work takes place. The Committee is not set up to hold and exercise legislative powers, but it does have a variety of means of exercising influence.

Most obviously the Committee prepares and publishes two or three Reports each year. These are detailed evaluations of the significance for policy of particular advances in the understanding and practice of science and technology. We always have the benefit of a specialist in the appropriate field, and scientists, Ministers, civil servants and administrators will attest to the thoroughness of the oral evidence sessions which follow up the prepared and submitted written evidence.

There is debate on the floor of the House on each Report following the Committee's evaluation of the written Government response. This requires an appropriate Minister to respond at the end of the debate. As we find thereafter, those who gave specialist written and oral evidence, as well as at times the media more generally, have a more informed and evidenced based platform to continue with the Committee in informing and critically evaluating the development of Government policy.

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