

THOUGHTS ON BECOMING CHAIRMAN



Ian Taylor MP

Raising awareness of science issues in the House of Commons is vital. I remember that from long ago when, as Science Minister, I had to encourage colleagues to ask me questions. "Anything – even hostile, but do not ignore me!" Since 1997, scrutiny has not been helped by two of my otherwise impressive successors being in the House of Lords, as there is little Ministerial encouragement for science to be debated in the Commons.

The Royal Society is hosting a debate in May on whether the 'two cultures' represents a divide in Parliament. This is over-hyped in politics where debates do not show a complete breakdown of communication between MPs with backgrounds in the sciences and the humanities. Yet there is a lack of scientific

confidence in the Commons to tackle 'evidence-based' enquiries relating to some key topics such as climate change actions, decisions of the NICE committee, viruses, embryo research, GM foods, biological/moral issues, energy security and nuclear, mobile phone risks, forensics, etc... My policy report to the Shadow Cabinet suggested scientific (and engineering) literacy lessons should be available for all MPs – with which the Royal Society and Royal Academy could assist.

Apart from the tenacious 'usual suspects', there is a narrow base of scientific expertise in the Commons (as opposed to the Lords). This is worrying, not only given the importance of the issues, but at the potential fragile Parliamentary support for protecting science budgets from being 'squeezed' in forthcoming public expenditure battles. We must invest in science if Britain is to compete effectively in the global market place and improve the quality of life at home. The Science Minister will need help! He will need even greater enthusiasm if any Government beyond the next election is to share the vision and action of President Obama, who seems to be emulating one of his predecessors. During the Depression, President Roosevelt tripled research funding and took advice from the National

Academy of Sciences. He sent veritable armies of researchers and engineers to the South, a region then long-neglected and undeveloped. From them came electricity, improved water management, better farming practices, erosion-preventing crops, reforestation, water quality improvements and reductions in water-borne diseases. Science pushed the region into the 20th century. Can we unleash scientists and engineers to have an impact of equivalent magnitude in the UK during the next decade?

Giving money to scientific and engineering endeavour may be a tough message to sell when people are losing their jobs, homes and hopes. We should not be too sure that research budgets are as robust as they appear. Despite the welcome and justified doubling of funds received by the Research Councils since 1997, it is salutary to note that overall government expenditure on R&D is no greater as a percentage of GDP than when I was Minister, according to the Sainsbury Review 'Race for the Top'. The casualty is funding for mission driven research. Yet particularly in a recession, we really need to show that applied scientists and creative engineers can provide the under-pinning necessary for new products and wealth creation. They should be raised to the status already rightly accorded to our basic scientists.

So the opportunity to become Chairman of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee in its 70th year is very exciting and enables me to do what I can to help raise the profile of science in both Houses. The Committee brings together an impressive range of academic and science based industries and institutes as well as Whitehall advisers – all of whom can have an effective input into policy formation on often contentious and topical issues. The publication 'Science in Parliament' has developed an authoritative reputation. I am also co-chair of the Parliamentary Space Committee and involved with POST as well as with several technology committees. So my commitment to the cause is evident! In a way, the P&S Committee should assist in pulling together some of the otherwise fragmented efforts of too many subject specific all-Party committees in both Houses – a view I share with my illustrious predecessor Dr Doug Naysmith.

It is also vital that we look outwards. Both scientists and politicians have the responsibility of explaining the benefits of the advancement of science. I am delighted that one of our first meetings is to be about 'TAKING SCIENCE TO THE STREET'. Indeed, if the public appreciated the importance of science more, they might lobby MPs to take more interest. A virtuous circle.

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