

SCIENCE POLICY RE-EXAMINED



Tim Boswell MP

from “all-science short lists” and I do respect the right of constituencies to choose, but a little more attention to this within party structures would be welcome.

Second, we do need to revisit the mechanism for representing science in Parliament. I have served for some time on the Departmental Select Committee covering the recently-created (and now abolished) DIUS. It is little secret that we were hard-pressed to cover the full range of topics from astronomy to vocational skills. The new DBIS will be even wider-spread, however the change has opened the welcome possibility of re-establishing a dedicated Commons Science and Technology Committee.

This in turn would encourage Government itself to treat its scientists more constructively. The Chief Scientist at the Government Office for Science needs to do even more to encourage an informed science culture across government, insisting for example on a common rigorous approach to evidence in formulating departmental policies, and better use of the scientific manpower available within the Civil Service.

Even more strategically, we will not as a country remediate our perceived ‘science deficit’ unless we can capture the imagination of young people to study STEM subjects and obtain

at least some qualifications in science, engineering or technology.

In order to do this, we also need to re-examine our motives in calling for greater public engagement in science. It would be wrong to put all the emphasis on business competitiveness, important though that is. I know from my own practice as a farmer how much the efficiency of that industry, both quantity and quality of production, has been enhanced by scientific advances, notably in plant-breeding and agrochemicals. As MP for Silverstone I experience nearly every day the ‘buzz’ of local applied high-tech industry at world class levels.

Beyond this, we should recognise the vital role that science plays in safeguarding the population and improving public services. I have a strong interest in disability and long-term health conditions, which are nearly all expectant of scientific breakthrough (depending on a principled but science-friendly legislation framework); but similar conditions apply right across the public sector, for example in areas like data-mapping and certainly in resource and cost reduction. We cannot get off first base in tackling critical social issues like climate change and obesity without strong science.

I should add for the record that there will be a strong case

even in today’s difficult financial climate for maintaining both science capability within government and the excellence of the science base outside it. This applies both to resources channelled through the Research Councils and to curiosity-driven Funding Council monies – there is an argument also that we should leave ‘space’ for unconventional approaches.

Finally, though, I would not like us to write off the importance of ‘science for its own sake’. The excitement of discovery is a strong attraction for young people. I can still remember the first pictures from the hidden side of the moon. In public policy, the rigour of scientific method and the proper use of evidence extends beyond the traditionally scientific department, and can draw in appropriate cross-disciplinary contributions from social sciences and the humanities. And science can be beautiful; look at the products of electron microscopy or the patterns of fractals (like Hokusai’s waves). If those of us who do not already know about this can “suspend our disbelief” for a moment, we might learn something and actually benefit from the process! And we need to remember that however ‘useless’ some science may appear at present, it is virtually certain that ‘practical’ discoveries to come will derive from it – products of human curiosity and human imagination.

It is now half a century since C P Snow introduced us to the concept of ‘Two Cultures’. Even if that has been subject to criticism and modification, there is little doubt that the two cultures of politics and science do not meet. The recruitment of MPs with science backgrounds, and the level of Parliamentary attention to scientific matters, (at least in the Commons) is fairly minimal. I make no claim to be the exception in that I began as a classicist, though later, resisting arbitrary distinctions, I turned to social science and even had two enjoyable years as a public-interest member on a Research Council.

The first task in redressing this could be simply to recruit more scientifically literate MPs (even if not fully engaged, at least those with a grasp of concepts and method). I am sure that we are a long way

... The Chief Scientist at the Government Office for Science needs to do even more to encourage an informed science culture across government ...

