

THAT WAS 13 YEARS THAT WAS!!



Dr Ian Gibson

I remember the conversation well. Ed Balls, whilst still in the Treasury in 1997, was confident that science after the barren years from 1979 was to receive support. And it did! New labs in schools and universities, better postgraduate stipends, revisions of the science curriculum and a doubling of the science budget have been delivered. And yet I believe we have not won the argument that science, technology and engineering underpin our economy and its success.

I have always believed that the way out of the recession was to use our strengths in the UK, our scientific base and

expand it even more to produce innovation in the health industries, biotechnology, green technologies agriculture and nanotechnology.

It seems this is not to happen. Budgets will be slashed and jobs lost. The production of science, technological and engineering graduates looks certain to suffer as morale sinks in higher education.

It's easy of course to talk about the good old days of science but much more difficult to extol its virtues in the current situation.

I was very pleased to see from 1997 onwards Ministers of Science appointed and indeed recently enter the Cabinet. The appointment of Ministers from the Lords however with the implications of 'buying the job' by donating funds to the Government Party, was always bound to be picked up by a hostile press. Support for science, however, survived as it rose up the political agenda.

It looks like science will suffer in the new 'age of public sector cuts'. I look back with a fondness for the heady days of science when the Commons Select Committee on Science (1997-2005) took up so many issues. We inquired into the role of The Royal Society, forensic science, science in the developing world, nanotechnology, the Research Councils, light pollution, the new technologies in human embryology, the research assessment exercise etc. All of which resulted in Government action. The Committee decision

to move science into the media received the support of scientists in the field and helped Science raise its profile in Parliament. Whips hated our view and The Royal Society picked up on certain issues and felt they should address them too. Press Officers were appointed to the Committee, Chairs were paid, but still Whips were allowed to appoint members of the Committee and Chairs.

The growth of science was mirrored by the development of the anti-science movement particularly in the GM debate. There is still no acknowledgement by many scientists that they were slow to pick up on the hostility to new technology. We are witnessing it again in the Climate Change debate and in particular over those e-mails. I am sure we will go through the agonies again with GM, nanotechnology and agriculture in the food security debate. There is a desperate need for a scientific presence in Parliament in the coming years. I note that the few qualified scientists will no longer be present in the next Parliament. The activities of debate, questioning and inquiry will be seriously diluted in an almost science-free Parliament. Will we still hear Ministers talking about being able to see the Milky Way on the internet, migrating birds blamed for passing diseases to animals and then on to humans? And will we have a scientifically illiterate elected House?

There is need for a think-tank which reaches out into the scientific arena and activates the

rank and file research scientists, postdoctoral and postgraduate students. I believe Newton's Apple will fulfil this role and help scientists engage with the political process. Societies are not engaged with the black arts of politics. A Council of Science, Technology and Engineering or a Ministry answerable to elected members should be the powerhouse for debate and decision making.

A model, which I enjoyed, could be the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. Those dinner sessions after the monthly talk were stimulating, informed and led, for example, to calls for an inquiry into Food Security and the role of the UK Government. This was delivered. I miss them. They were a delight to attend, unlike those scientific debates in the House where a stand-in from Government merely read from a script with no passion or knowledge of the subject.

I hope there will continue to be voices speaking up for science. I cannot see young scientists entering the House as MPs given the current situation, and failure to engage with politics. The work will have to be channelled through extra-parliamentary activity if we are to see science influence on policy.

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