

# PARTING SHOTS

## BY DOUG NAYSMITH (PAST CHAIRMAN)



Dr Doug Naysmith

As I look back over 13 years in the House as a backbench member with major interests in Health Policy and Science Policy, I am convinced of the importance of both Select Committees and All Party Parliamentary Groups such as the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee (the P and SC) in achieving evidence-based policies. As a member of the Health Select Committee for nine years I saw clear evidence of Health Policy being influenced for the better – not least in the way our report and amendment to the Control of Smoking in Public Places legislation rendered it both workable and effective.

The P and SC, though not a statutory committee, has also been and continues to be very influential. Set up in 1939, it is the oldest backbench All Party Group and has been responsible for bringing together members of both Houses and scientists from research institutes, universities and industry to inform both 'sides' better about the views, problems and aspirations of the other. Although backbench groups continue to proliferate – there are certainly too many of them now – the P and SC is too valuable to be lost. As an officer of the P and SC for ten years (in various capacities and latterly as Chairman for four years), I have seen how much it is appreciated and needed. Having spun off POST (the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) and been influential in the setting up of the Science Select Committees in their various guises, there is still much for the P and SC to do as a pressure group for evidence-based policy decisions and informing Members of the possibilities. When the new Parliament meets to get properly into its stride, it is important that it takes Science and evidence-based policy seriously – and be seen to take it seriously. One of its first actions should be to set up

a Science and Technology Committee, with a wide-ranging brief over all Government Departments – not just whichever Department currently houses Science.

Secondly, the new Government should make clear that it intends to protect investment in science, technology and innovation; these provide the bases from which the country's future economic growth will come and our future wealth depends on it. Encouraging words were said on this by Adam Afriyie (the then Conservative spokesperson for Science – see the Autumn 2009 edition of SiP) and I hope David Willetts, the new Minister of State in the coalition government will recognise the importance of this too.

The last Labour Government invested more, and took more notice of scientific advice from expert sources than any other previous government. It also tried to make policy decisions based on evidence rather than on political dogma or media-fashionable views.

Nevertheless, there were some major failures, not least of which was to be bullied by pressure groups and exaggerated media coverage into ignoring the potential of GM technology.

There is a better story to tell in the MMR debate where eventually, unsubstantiated advice coupled with media hype has been rejected, although much damage has been done in the process to the image of immunisation; a technology which has led to the elimination of smallpox and is well on the way to eliminating polio too.

It must always be the case that governments will make decisions based on factors other than scientific evidence; although the evidence must at least be considered and the reasons explained and made available for discussion. That this did not happen in the recent controversial case of Professor David Nutt's sacking by Alan Johnson probably led to the controversy. I hope that such a case will not happen again if the new "Principles for the Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice" can be agreed and implemented by the new Government and representatives of the Scientific Community.

After thirteen wonderful years as a scientist on the back benches I cannot better Tony Blair's comment on his last day as Prime Minister, "That is that. The end."