

SCIENCE FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS?



Phil Willis
Chair of Science and Technology
Select Committee 2005 – 2010.

When asked to comment on what I will miss most about leaving Parliament I always answer without hesitation – ‘being a member of the Science and Technology Select Committee’. The past five years as Chair have made me realise the importance of the select committee system for parliamentary scrutiny but equally the crucial role that science plays in government, society and the future of our global existence. Indeed there is virtually no aspect of our lives from medicine to sport, industry to the environment where science and its application are not crucial for success.

The case for science has never been greater and the UK science community has arguably never been stronger yet the support for science in parliament is weak and for most MP’s peripheral to their roles both in Westminster and in their constituencies. This apparent dichotomy may result from the fact that few MP’s have a science background either academically or industrially but I suspect that that is more of an excuse rather than a reason. Just as two decades ago the scientific community led by the Royal Society launched the hugely successful ‘Save British Science’ which brought science and policy making together. The 2004 Science and Innovation Framework created a tangible vision for science within government. Recent initiatives at school and university level have seen the prioritisation of science courses for A2 and undergraduate students. ‘Science for Parliamentarians’ must now be the campaign challenge as the 2010 intake of MP’s take their places on the green benches.

This will not be an easy challenge to overcome. As recent research for the Times showed whilst in the last parliament 86 MP’s had a graduate science degree background (13.3%) the new parliament is likely to have no more than 77 (11.8%) with only three PhD scientists, Sarah Wallington, Stella Conway and Julian Huppert joining the ranks. Nor will there be a strong cadre of existing science advocates to greet them. Dr Brian Iddon, Dr Doug Naysmith, Dr Ian Gibson and Dr Des Turner have all retired as Labour MP’s and Conservative science champions Ian Taylor and Robert Key have also gone. This means that the Chairmanship and the composition of the new Science and Technology Select Committee will have a greater importance than ever before. The Committee will have a role of not only scrutinising science across government but championing science in the Commons and outside in the broader community.

There is no doubt that the

Science and Technology Select Committee under leadership from all three political parties has punched well above its weight in taking on difficult and demanding inquiries. The fact that it is hugely valued by the science community is without question. Where else has one seen a campaign to have a Committee restored after it was lost in the recent ill advised move to create the Department of Universities, Innovation and Skills? It is that legacy which hopefully will prove the spur for the new committee to lead a ‘Science for Parliamentarians’ revolution in 2010 and beyond.

The need for a science committee with a broad and innovative remit is not new – indeed that need has been apparent for over 70 years, a period in which science has come to exert a strong influence on many aspects of public life. The first committee was established in the 1930’s following a campaign by amongst others HG Wells and the then editor of Nature Sir Richard Gregory. However it was not until 1966 that select committee for science and technology was formed. Active until it was disbanded in 1979 this committee produced some valuable reports including the 1967 report on the *United Kingdom Nuclear Reactor Programme* which Tony Benn the Minister of Technology claimed was “a document of great value”.

Between 1979 and 1992 science took a back seat in terms of parliamentary scrutiny and importance – more often

than not being seen as a subset of education. So much so that the House of Lords moved to create its own Science and Technology Committee though its remit and arguably its influence was inevitably less broad. However after a break of 13 years the modern science and technology select committee re-emerged in 1992 following the creation of the Office for Science and Technology headed by the Chief Scientific Adviser. This new committee quickly made its mark with hugely influential reports on cancer, carbon capture and storage, light pollution and stem cells. It also took on the role of scrutinising the then £1 billion budget spent on research through the Research Councils.

My involvement with the committee began in 2005 after the General Election. After six years leading the Liberal Democrat Front Bench team on Education and Employment I sought to return to the back benches and take up a position on the S & T Committee largely because of my fascination with science rather than any deep knowledge or experience. Overcoming this very obvious hurdle was never going to be easy considering that the previous Chair Dr Ian Gibson was recognised as the Commons leading voice on science and a scientist with a strong track record as an academic at the University of East Anglia. The Committee too had a coterie of scientists who

regarded my lack of scientific knowledge as barrier to leading the committee though most including the admirable Dr Brian Iddon (a massive loss the Commons) quickly offered support, advice and explanation on complex language and concepts.

What quickly dawned on me was that this was not a committee simply for scientists to test their skills and knowledge but a vehicle to examine policy and engage a wider audience with science. In fact the very challenge that faces the 2010 committee. It is after all, not the scientists who need persuading of the value of science but the rest of us who are not naturally drawn to its defence.

On a personal basis I set out to meet, understand and engage with the broader scientific community and spent one day each week visiting scientific establishment to discover a world full of the most exciting people, research projects, discoveries and unbelievable ambitions. Whether visiting the Atlas experiment in Cern, the genetics laboratories at the Sanger Institute, the oceanography centre at Southampton or the Centre for Life in Newcastle – I found a world of science, technology and engineering that made my passion for science all the stronger. Of greater importance was the realisation that every single global challenge that we faced would depend on our scientists and engineers working to find solutions.

... the true value of science
comes from seeking truth ...

The realisation that the Science and Technology Committee could look at any aspect of the government's involvement with science and prepare a commentary and make recommendations has been truly exhilarating. There was of course never sufficient time to do all the inquiries we wanted to do and indeed the lack of members willing to engage with the work of the committee at times put intolerable burdens on a core of dedicated colleagues. (This is a problem that must be addressed in the future if the Select Committee system is to function effectively). Despite this challenge eight inquiries were completed in the six months prior to parliament being dissolved. Nor was our work without controversy!

The proposal to 'evidence check' whether evidence was being used to underpin government policy was not a new idea – it had been a constant theme for the Committee for five years. We looked at a wide range of government initiatives from swine flu vaccinations to the teaching of "pseudoscience" in our universities but decided to hold short inquiries into *Early Literary Interventions* including dyslexia and *Homeopathy* – concerning the licensing of homeopathic products and NHS funding. Both evidence checks concluded huge flaws in the formulation and justification for government policy and in the case of homeopathy a glaring disregard for any evidence base at all. The fact that the wrath of the homeopathic community descended on the Committee was interesting!

Of course the S&T Committee has never shied away from controversy – our decision in 2006 to continue the work commenced by Ian

Gibson on the *Human Reproduction and the Law* led us to challenge Government thinking on the licensing of research on embryos and in particular the use of admixed embryos. The fact that subsequent legislation incorporated many of our recommendations is testimony to the power of the select committee system.

Few Committees have been as influential as the S&T Committee. The 2000 and 2002 Reports on *Cancer Research – a fresh look and Cancer Research – a follow up* were largely responsible for the 2000 NHS Cancer Plan. An inquiry into an obscure 2006 EU directive that would have virtually stopped the use of MRI scanners in the NHS resulted in the Commission postponing and later completely revising its proposals on its electromagnetic field directive. The 2007 Report *Investigating the Oceans* resulted in the government agreeing to the creation of a National Oceanographic Centre to promote and coordinate marine science research. And despite the furore it caused, our 2007 review of the *Scientific Developments Relating to the Abortion Act* allowed us to present an objective analysis of such developments to Parliament that proved invaluable when amendments to change the Abortion Act were tabled later in that year.

It is therefore with a heavy heart I pass on the mantle of Chairman but I earnestly hope that the he or she will continue the quest to search for evidence when examining government policy. After all the true value of science comes from seeking truth – and that all too often makes politicians of all persuasions rather uncomfortable.

