

ANNUAL LUNCHEON OF THE PARLIAMENTARY AND SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

The Annual Lunch of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee was held on Wednesday, 27th October 2010 in the Cholmondeley Room and Terrace, House of Lords.

The President, The Rt Hon Lord Jenkin of Roding, opened proceedings with a warm welcome to all present.

"At a time when there are close on 400 All-Party Groups in Parliament, I always like to remind people that we were the first such Group.

Founded in 1939 amid the perils of the threat of war, this unique institution came into being as a crucial necessity to guide Parliament and the Government on the role of science and technology.

In its early years, after the war, it was responsible for securing a number of innovative changes in the relations between science, Government and Parliament. For instance, it was this Committee which started the process that eventually led to the formation of POST. It also was very influential in the establishment of the Science and Technology Select Committees in both Houses of Parliament – Committees which have a vital role in holding Governments to

account, and helping to ensure that Ministers are kept aware of trends and discoveries in S and T.

However valuable all this has been and is, we have to recognise that, as a consequence, the P & Sci no longer occupies the central role it once had – particularly in holding Ministers to account.

Yet, successive Officers and Councils have successfully ensured that we continue to have a really worthwhile role. We are a unique focus and think-tank for science and technology. We are an important bridge between, on the one hand, scientists, engineers and technologists in industry, academia, the professions, and on the other, Members of both Houses. We can be a platform for those able to put forward new ideas which need consideration in Parliament; for those who have new scientific advances to report, and for those seeking to influence the research policies of





Departments. These are matters of importance to Governments of all persuasions.

It is significant that our Chairman, Andrew Miller MP, was elected to this post shortly before he was elected by the House of Commons to be the Chair of the Select Committee on Science and Technology. His dual role, though no doubt time-consuming, is very valuable in both jobs.

Enough about us! My main duty today is to welcome David Willetts MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science, as our guest speaker.

After leaving university, he began his career in the Treasury, progressed to further senior posts near the centre of Government; and entered Parliament in 1992 as the MP for Havant. His great abilities – the media do not call him ‘two-brains’ for nothing! – led to early front bench appointments – he did time as a whip, then a Minister in the Cabinet Office, then Paymaster General, all in his first term in the House. When David Cameron became Leader of the Opposition, David Willetts was appointed shadow spokesman on Education and Skills, later being promoted to spokesman, shadowing that curious but short-lived Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Following the 2010 election, David was made Minister of State for Universities and Science. In that capacity he attends Cabinet. It is widely

recognised in Whitehall, and increasingly outside, that it was David’s influence and arguments in the CSR which won such a good settlement for Science. He is currently involved, together with his Secretary of State, Vince Cable, in working out how the recommendations of the Browne Committee can be carried forward into policy decisions on the future financing of the Universities. He is right at the centre of the issues that are of great interest to this Committee, and we very much look forward to hearing what he has to say to us. Over to you, David!”

DAVID WILLETTS MP

David Willetts thanked Lord Jenkin for the introduction. “It’s a great pleasure to be here to celebrate what has been a great year for British science. When one thinks of all those Nobel Prize winners, it is an extraordinary recognition of the strength of our science base. It is also a year where we mark a new vigour in the relationships between the scientific community and both Houses of Parliament.

The Parliamentary and Scientific Committee is hugely important. I only realised when I read Andrew Miller’s excellent piece in the most recent edition of *Science in Parliament* that the group was founded in 1939. Lord Jenkin touched on this in his introduction. One can only

assume that there was recognition, with war looming, that investing in, and understanding, science and technology was going to be crucial. As we all know, the role of British scientists in the war was crucial. The extraordinary productivity and creativity of that period is something that still amazes us.

Well, we now have a different type of challenge, it’s an economic challenge, and it’s one where we have to recognise that our competitors are themselves investing. As Martin Rees pointed out so persuasively in the weeks and months running up to the science settlement, we had to take into account what was happening in other countries. I’m very pleased that with the new kind of challenges that we face, in the CSR settlement, the Coalition Government did indeed recognise the enormous importance of science and research.

And so it is not so much a great pleasure as a great relief that we got the settlement we did. Just to take you through the figures, we have a commitment to a ring-fenced budget each year of £4.6bn. So it’s a secure, ring-fenced budget for the next four years. We still have to decide on the exact breakdown of the figures.

Although we have yet to decide on the breakdown of the figures, as a rough indication I can tell you in the current year we give Research Councils £2.75bn, HEFCE £1.6bn for QR funding for universities, the Academies £0.1bn and the Higher Education Innovation Fund £0.15bn, which adds up to £4.6bn. That gives you a rough sense of the scale of the flows of funds that we’re talking about.

It is ring-fenced, it is secure but, of course, the protected cash settlement that we now have presents us all with a challenge – a challenge to deliver efficiency savings. If we can offset much of the effects of inflation at 9 or 10% over the next four years, by delivering the kind of efficiency savings that Bill Wakeham has identified in his very useful report, for example, then we really will be able to ensure we have a stable and secure science base.

So the funding is important. But other things are important as well. And I just wanted to touch on two others. One thing that matters is being able to convert that science spending into economic activity and economic benefit.

That does not mean that individual scientists carrying out their research have to be expected to behave as if they’re businessmen. They are not, they





have a different set of skills, and they have a different set of interests. We should not expect scientists carrying out their research to be thinking of some commercial application or other every day. That is bad for science, and in the long run it's bad for the economy as well.

But we do need people with broader skill sets who then think about how the ideas emerging from our very productive science and research base themselves have a practical industrial application. Last week we announced the CSR settlement for science. This week we've been able to announce funding for Technology and Innovation Centres, as proposed by both Herman Hauser in his report for the previous Government and also by James Dyson in his report for my Party. We hope that the £200m or so that we have identified to fund those will also help tackle one of the great challenges we've always faced in Britain; ensuring that we can move through those technology readiness levels from the scientific research to genuine commercial applications.

That is a crucial challenge. I invite the different experts that I see here today to start thinking and advising us on the sectors where we need these Technology and Innovation Centres and how we define their role. Come forward with ideas. The next few months are

going to be crucial as we develop our plans and I very much welcome any input we may have from the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, or from the Science and Technology Select Committees, as we develop our specific proposals.

So as well as science, there is a technology and commercial agenda. My third point is the importance of ensuring that those of us in the House of Commons and House of Lords have proper access to scientific advice and information.

We cannot be accused of slavish devotion to empirical evidence in day to day politics. Just occasionally the argument runs free, and perhaps runs rather ahead of the evidence base that one might require. Fortunately, our speeches do not have to appear in peer reviewed journals. Indeed, I even remember the arguments when there was the suggestion that basic standards set by the Advertising Standards Authority should apply to political speeches. Even that we had a bit of a problem with.

So I have to accept that in politics we don't always match the high standards of rigour and evidence that the scientific community expects. However, it is very important that we have the opportunity to draw on scientific evidence. The



Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and the Select Committees all ensure that we do that.

Finally, there have been some rather pessimistic comments that we are losing parliamentarians with scientific knowledge and understanding. I want to take you through this, because we have to look at the picture in the round. Of course there are very distinguished parliamentarians, with a close interest in science, who have sadly stood down. I saw Ian Taylor here for example, who made a fantastic contribution over the years in the House of Commons and who is no longer a colleague.

But at the same time we have new members of parliament joining us with an interest in science. I see opposite me George Freeman, who really knows about this and it's great

that George is here today. Although it went very much against the grain, we actually commissioned a small bit of empirical research on this. I can report to this group that before May, based on the calculations we made, there were 65 Members of Parliament who had a degree level qualification in science or engineering. Since the election in May there are still approximately 65 Members of Parliament with a degree in science or engineering.

So we have at least maintained what I can only call a protected base. We have secured, once again, stability. We may wish to have an increase but at least we have stability. We have frozen it at that nominal level of 65. I hope you appreciate what an achievement that is! Of course if we can build on that base it would be excellent, but at least we have that as a secure base from which we can start. Thank you very much indeed.

Following a brief discussion, the Chairman, Andrew Miller MP, then proposed a vote of thanks to David Willetts for this demonstration of his unfailing confidence in and strong encouragement and support for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and all those who contribute towards this aim as key components in the recovery of the UK from the depths of the economic downturn.

