

VOICE OF THE FUTURE MARCH 2012

Something unprecedented occurred on 14th March in the House of Commons.

For the first time – **ever** – a Select Committee meeting was held which completely reversed the normal pattern.

Young scientists and engineers came to the House and sat in the Boothroyd Room in Portcullis House in the seats normally reserved for MPs.

The MPs – and the Minister and Shadow Minister – appeared as witnesses. The BBC Parliament Channel was there to record it.

Voice of the Future 2012 gave young scientists and engineers a unique chance to visit the House of Commons to take part in a science question time, organised by the Society of Biology. The Rt Hon David Willetts MP, Chi Onwurah MP, Andrew Miller MP and Members of the Science and Technology Select Committee were quizzed by young people in the first event of its kind.

The Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt Hon John Bercow MP, inaugurated the event and praised the Society of Biology for organising it.



Pre-prepared questions were then invited from young people, who included school pupils, school teachers, university students and scientists.

The first witnesses to take questions were the Minister of Science, the Rt Hon David Willetts MP, and the new Chief Scientific Adviser for BIS, Professor John Perkins. The Minister openly discussed the challenges he has faced as Science Minister, focusing on

persuading colleagues that science funding was important in a tough economic climate. He was also keen to stress the importance of the Haldane Principle.

The pair were then asked about how they dealt with a situation where scientific advice differs from the political. They were keen to stress that science advice is not seen in isolation; it is one of many considerations in policy development. Willetts caused controversy by giving the example of homeopathy, and

justifying NHS funding because people want it despite the scientific evidence being stacked against it.

The Society of Biology's Chief Executive, Dr Mark Downs, said: "Both Willetts and Perkins were keen to stress the importance of Learned Societies, such as the Society of Biology, in forging links with business, and as a key source of advice and talent. The

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opportunity to run events such as this enables us to nurture the talents of young people so they can make a valuable contribution to politics and society. Bringing young people into contact with MPs was a valuable opportunity for them to get involved with science policy.”

The next group to field questions were Andrew Miller MP and no less than seven members of the Science and

Mosley, MP for the City of Chester, saw a role for MPs to lead the discussion on GM.

Sixth form students were amongst those asking questions, and many took the opportunity to bring up education issues. Ideas suggested by the Select Committee for improving science in schools included encouraging more scientists to become teachers, particularly at primary level, diversifying

computer science education by using open-source software, and greater practical work facilitated by links with universities.

The UK’s broad expertise in all the sciences and the collaborations this enables was put forward by MPs as a key way British science can hold its own. Inspiring the brightest young people to become scientists was agreed to be essential to our success.

The final witness was Chi Onwurah MP, Shadow Minister for Science and Innovation. She expressed her concern over reduced investment in science, and stressed the need for a science and innovation strategy that supports growth. She was keen to create a flow of people with the skills science needs, and would therefore not cap immigration.

Onwurah pointed out that the small numbers of women and ethnic minorities in science don’t reflect the diversity of the population. She felt it was the responsibility of every scientist to ensure that women are supported in their careers. She also discussed general issues surrounding careers in science and was keen that academia shouldn’t be seen as the only career path. Industry is a major employer of scientists.

Dr Downs said: “Voice of the Future was a unique opportunity for young people to visit Parliament and hear MPs’ views on issues that are important to them. There were some very insightful questions which displayed young people’s passion for science and their engagement with political issues.”



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Technology Select Committee – including one whose first meeting it was.

A question about the future of genetic engineering triggered interesting answers, with members of the Committee keen to re-open the debate of the pros and cons. Followers of the event on Twitter voiced their support for a reconsideration of the current position. Stephen



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