

# PARLIAMENTARY LINKS DAY 2012

This year's Parliamentary Links Day, now organised by the Society of Biology on behalf of the science and engineering community, was held in the House on 26th June. The theme was **SCIENCE AND SPORT** in view of the approaching Olympic and Paralympic Games.

It was the biggest ever Parliamentary Links Day and around 250 MPs, Peers, Parliamentary staff, athletes and distinguished scientists from an exceptionally wide variety of scientific organisations listened to a stream of interesting presentations and networked over lunch.

The event was chaired in the Commons by Andrew Miller MP, Chair of House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee and in the Lords by Lord Willis of Knaresborough, a member of the House of Lords Committee on Science and Technology.

The Speaker of the House of Commons, Rt Hon John Bercow MP, welcomed everyone to a packed Attlee Suite and praised the Society of Biology for its role in Links Day which exists to strengthen the dialogue between Parliament and the science community.

"I know, from my unique vantage point in the House, that Members on all sides continue to raise issues that have a scientific aspect to them. It is all the more important that every Member of Parliament should be able to benefit from non-partisan assistance of the kind offered by professional scientific bodies like the Society of Biology, the Institute of Physics, the Royal Society of Chemistry and many others with their proven commitment to public interest."

Subsequent speakers included the Science Minister,



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Rt Hon David Willetts MP, and Dr Julian Huppert MP (a co-sponsor of the event) along with sportsmen and sport scientists passionate about the Olympic legacy. The Minister observed that "Often the sporting environment is one of the first places where technical innovations are seen and can be tested. Sport drives innovation."



Baroness Campbell, Chair of UK Sport, spoke about working with scientists to show that sport is a fundamental right for every child. Rt Hon Dame Tessa Jowell MP, Shadow Minister for the Olympics, pointed to the importance of using science in

policy. She also thanked soil scientists for their work decontaminating 2000 tonnes of polluted soil and 20 million gallons of groundwater at the Olympic site, regenerating an area of wasteland the size of Hyde Park into housing, an

urban parkland and a wildlife haven with wildflower beds and boxes for roosting bats. The park later claimed the world record for the most bird boxes (525) at any Olympic Park.

In the first of two panel discussions Andy Parkinson, chief executive of UK Anti-Doping, explained how new scientific techniques meant samples from athletes could be tested over long periods – up to eight years – and that the UK was leading the way in doping detection ahead of London 2012.

Steve Ingham from the English Institute of Sport told how advances in the science of altitude training are improving the performance of UK athletes. The Institute can now consistently increase athletes' haemoglobin mass by up to 12%, where once not everyone would respond to this type of training. He reported that simple advances in warm-up techniques have recently improved 400m sprint times by up to a second.

UCL's Director of the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health, Professor Fares Haddad, explained to the audience how



advances in medicine for elite athletes often translates into better treatment for non-athletes. The University is currently working on the 'holy grail' of knee injury prevention, the ability to repair surface cartilage.



David Gordon, head of Media Events Coverage at the BBC, described the advances in digital technology that would make coverage of this year's Olympic Games more comprehensive than ever – with every sport available to watch and up to 24 events being broadcast simultaneously. Gordon also revealed that the BBC would soon be broadcasting in Super Hi-Vision, a broadcast technology 16 times higher definition than existing HD.

Dr Mark Downs, Chief Executive of the Society of Biology, commented that "Links Day was extremely successful and highlighted the many ways in which science and engineering work together to have a positive impact on the Olympics. The Games rely on the latest technologies, from



techniques for detecting doping to ways of improving athlete performance. These technologies can have far wider effect than competitive sport. For example, nutrition for elite athletes can also be valuable for patients recovering from

operations: both athletes and patients have bodies under extreme stress."

An Early Day Motion on the Order Paper congratulated the Society of Biology on organising this year's Parliamentary Links Day and welcomed the contribution that scientific societies make to assisting Parliament.

## THE OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC GAMES

The enthusiasm of the speakers at Parliamentary Links Day paved the way for a fantastic Olympic Games. Team GB won a staggering 65 medals to secure third place in the medal table, and over 7.4 million spectators visited Olympic venues around the UK.

At the Games the UK anti-doping agency worked tirelessly to ensure that London 2012 was as clean as possible, and carried out over 6,000 tests for banned substances in athletes' blood and urine. Andy Parkinson, UK Anti-Doping Chief Executive, said: "The World Anti-Doping Agency reported that over 100 potential Olympians were stopped from competing at the Games because of doping, while the International Olympic Committee announced a number of positive tests during the course of the Games. This is good news for clean athletes around the world."

Speakers at Links Day had amazed the audience with some examples of world records – tapes along the wall and the floor of the Attlee Suite marked the world high jump record

(2.45m) and long jump record (8.95m). Both those records remain. But, as expected, records were broken at the London 2012 Olympics as athlete performance continues to improve. Some striking performances included the fastest ever 800m, run by Kenyan athlete David Rudisha, and a record time for the Great Britain team in the 3km women's cycling pursuit. On behalf of the Society of Biology, Dr Mark Downs said "UK sport has received a boost from the Olympics and a boost from science. Support from across the science and engineering sector has been essential to the success of the Games. I look forward to seeing how the Olympic legacy unfolds, and for a continued relationship between science and sport"

## CONCLUSION

Mr Speaker Bercow had opened Parliamentary Links Day 2012 by saying that although there is a "great distance to travel" in terms of promoting scientific understanding among MPs, there has been a great deal of progress in recent years.

The largest ever attendance for a Links Day showed the appetite that exists for scientists and MPs to share their knowledge in order to improve the use of science in policy decisions.

Science and Universities Minister, Rt Hon David Willetts MP, rightly observed that Parliamentary Links Day has become "the biggest gathering of scientists coming to Parliament".

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**David Willetts**

