

PARLIAMENTARY LINKS DAY 2013

Science and Diversity



The Attlee Suite was filled to capacity – standing room only from the start – for this year’s Parliamentary Links Day on 25 June on the timely theme of Science and Diversity. Early tweets spoke of “a huge turnout” and “biggest science event in Parliament!” For connoisseurs of Twitter the event was trending by the end of the morning session!

The Speaker, the Rt John Bercow MP, opened the proceedings and referred to the proactive work the House of Commons is now doing to promote diversity within its workforce, a point later emphasised by the Head of Diversity and Inclusion, Anne Foster.

Parliamentary Links Day remains the largest single science event on the annual Parliamentary calendar, and was again sponsored on a tripartite

basis by Andrew Miller MP, Stephen Metcalfe MP and Dr Julian Huppert MP.

Organised by the Society of Biology on behalf of the science and engineering community, Links Day promotes links and understanding between the

“Parliamentary Links Day continues to make a real and worthwhile contribution to the understanding of Members of science and engineering issues.”

Mr Speaker Bercow

worlds of Science, Parliament and Government.

This year’s format included a mixture of keynote speeches and panel discussions.

Keynote addresses from Rt Hon David Willetts MP, the Minister for Universities and Science, and Shabana

Mahmood MP, the Shadow Minister, discussed the role of education in influencing diversity in STEM subjects while Andrew Miller MP announced a new initiative by the Select Committee on women in STEM careers.

Stephen Metcalfe MP and Dr Julian Huppert MP then chaired the two panel sessions which explored the themes of diversity in science (and ways in which this could be improved) and science’s contribution in enabling diversity. The panel members involved a wide range of people with considerable

experience of diversity issues from biology, physics, engineering, maths and chemistry.

In a video message at the start the Co-Chair of the Prime Minister’s Council on Science and Technology, Dame Nancy Rothwell, stated that Diversity is important “not just because it’s the right thing to do but because we can’t afford to lose talent”. Moreover it wasn’t just about women in science, but also embraced ethnicity, sexuality and disability.

Professor Alice Brown of the Royal Society of Edinburgh promoted a holistic approach. She believes that diversity in science is an issue for universities, learned societies and research councils, as well as for the Government. An all-women panel then discussed the roles of education (through schools, universities and the

media), employers, and the government.

Speaker after speaker emphasised the importance of promoting diversity in science by allowing equal opportunities regardless of gender, race, sexuality or disability. The topic of women in science was high on the day's agenda as STEM subjects are highly affected by the "leaky pipeline", a metaphor which describes the decreasing number of women at progressive career stages. Some of the evidence was stark. For example, Dr Cathy Hobbs, from the Council for Mathematical Sciences, said that while 40% maths undergraduates are women only 6% of maths professors are women, and only 10% of pharmacology professors are women. Meanwhile the UK has the

of ScienceGrrl (a campaigning organisation formed relatively recently) discussed the importance of role models for developing an interest in science – in particular, the importance of good relationships between teachers and students. The STEM Ambassador scheme brought people with a passion for STEM subjects to schools, helping to inspire young people



Several argued that there is a vital role for the media in influencing career choice and that more role models were needed, such as female scientists on TV, with scientists breaking the "lab coat" stereotype, could help enthuse young people about the prospect of a scientific career. Among the positive suggestions made was one by Shabana

Mahmood MP, Shadow Science Minister, which was the proposal to make gender equity a criterion for the OFSTED monitoring of schools.

Employers could help promote diversity in science in several ways. Work experience was vital for helping young people investigate career options, so increasing the provision of good quality work experience could make a big difference to young people considering science as a career.



"... Events like yours are important and provide an opportunity to hear new ideas about how best to approach the challenges we face. The Deputy Prime Minister"

"I would like to congratulate the Society of Biology for its vision in organising this event..."

The Prime Minister

lowest % of female professional engineers in Europe and only 4% of engineering apprenticeships in the UK are women.

Dr Heather Williams, Director

and show them what it's like to be a professional in a STEM subject. The scheme has over 20,000 voluntary Ambassadors across the UK and it was encouraging that 40% are female.



“That this House... welcomes the Society's commitment to serve the public interest by improving the access of all hon. Members to scientific information and a better understanding of science;”
Early Day Motion

Various people agreed that women might feel more encouraged to stay in science if it were easier to have a scientific career whilst raising children. Employers could advocate shared parental leave and provide subsidised good-quality childcare, to help parents raise a family without sacrificing career goals.

Professor Amrita Ahluwalia, of the British Pharmacological Society, suggested the use of quotas to help employers address diversity issues in science. This engendered opposition from Roma Agrawal, of the engineering company WSP. She believed that quotas undermined merit-based recruitment and advocated instead the mentoring of young people through university and job applications, and working to change the stereotypes that surround STEM subjects.

Stephen Metcalfe MP, in concluding the first panel discussion, said that encouraging diversity in science is “not just the right thing to do, but the essential thing to do” while Dr Julian Huppert MP reminded everyone that all three major political parties cared about science and there was a common commitment to

investigate the issues involved in making diversity in science a reality.

Andrew Miller MP used the occasion of Links Day to announce on behalf of the Science & Technology Select Committee the launch of the new “Women in STEM Careers” inquiry aiming to investigate the “leaky pipeline” (<http://parliament.uk/science>). He encouraged everyone present to contribute with written evidence.

Speaking on behalf of the Government and winding up the morning session, the Rt Hon David Willetts MP suggested that forcing young people to specialise early (at the age of

making changes in the school learning system would require an overhaul of university-level teaching.

“We want the scientific community, just like government, to look like the country it represents”, he said and believed that a diverse group of people is often best for tackling problems.

At the Links Day Luncheon, hosted by the Earl of Selborne in the absence of Lord Willis of Knaresborough, the space scientist Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock spoke passionately about the need for diversity in science and drew upon her own career in an inspirational way.



16, when choosing subjects for post-GCSE study) contributes to the “leaky pipeline”.

He advocated a European-style baccalaureate system in which the breadth of the curriculum was maintained until the age of 18. However, the current university environment requires a high degree of subject-specific knowledge gained through A-level study, so

The hundreds of people attending were provided with a detailed briefing pack. The Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition all paid their own tributes to the work of the Society of Biology in organising Links Day and praised the scientific community. The event also drew cross-party support from all sides of the House in EDM 278.

“I congratulate the Society of Biology on its continuing efforts to bring science into Parliament.”

The Leader of the Opposition

Valuable discussions on #diversityinSTEM at Parliamentary Links Day with especially strong contribution from @RomaTheEngineer
 Tweet from Peter Luff MP

It's great to see #diversityinSTEM trending - it shows the widespread commitment to tackling #diversity challenges
 Tweet from the Society of Biology

#diversityinSTEM is trending worldwide today. Well good afternoon to you too twitter. :)
 Audience Member

Buzzing from an amazing day at Parliament. Brilliant speakers, motivated individuals + societies makes me v optimistic.
 #diversityinSTEM
 Tweet from Roma Agrawal

Lack of Women is more prominent in engineering than Science
 @RomaTheEngineer
 #diversityinSTEM
 @RAEngNews

Now watching a video from Dame Nancy Rothwell highlighting that #diversityinSTEM is not just about women but ethnicity, disability etc

We need a stronger, more diverse economy, and we're going to need skills to achieve that says @shabanamahmood
 #diversityinSTEM

You can access the full Twitter Storify at http://storify.com/Society_Biology/links-day