

Mission Impossible?

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“Mission impossible” was how one Member of the Science and Technology Committee described my appointment as Chairman just over a year ago. As a “non scientist”, how could I possibly step into the shoes of Dr Ian Gibson and command any respect from the scientific community? Indeed given the remarkably high profile Ian had given the committee, surely the promotion of science and technology within Parliament would be diminished?

The answer was not to try and replicate a formula that had produced ground breaking Reports such as “Forensic Science on Trial” and “Human Reproductive Technologies and the Law” but to create new directions and different ways of working. Building on such superb foundations made my job “mission incredible” not “impossible” and so it has transpired.

The learning curve has been steep but hugely exciting. I began by trying to meet as many key figures in the scientific world as possible and quickly learnt this was a near impossible task – so rich is the UK in scientific talent. Whether in Swindon meeting Professor Ian Diamond and his fellow Research Council Chief Executives, the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering with the eminent Lords May and Broers or the DTI with Lord Sainsbury, Sir Keith O’Nions and the remarkable Sir David King – the message I received was the same. The scientific community is excited and proud about what it does, is anxious to share its achievements and aspirations and is often frustrated that parliamentarians do not engage as effectively as they might.

Certainly by the time the new Science and Technology Committee undertook its first Inquiry “Carbon Capture and Storage Technology”, I was well aware of the responsibility

to and the expectation from the science and technology community. I had also been made aware that Select Committees have established ways of working and change is not always welcome! The task of deciding new Inquiries was more difficult than I had envisaged, primarily because individual Members have such diverse and complex interests and there are an abundance of exciting areas to explore. Achieving consensus was sometimes challenging. However the Committee has embarked upon some new and hopefully useful ways of working.

The recent inquiry into “Scientific Advice to Government” which examined the Government’s commitment to evidence based policy making used three case studies to explore in more depth the issue of scientific advice and risk. The technology underpinning the Government’s plans for ID cards, the classification of drugs and the EU Physical Agents (Electromagnetic Fields) Directive relating to the use of MRI scanners enabled three highly topical Reports to be published prior to the overarching Report in the autumn.

The Committee also embarked upon its first thematic inquiry into the work of the Research Councils, taking as its first theme the Councils’ approach to knowledge transfer in recognition of the growing emphasis placed by the Government on innovation.

Perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of my first year as Chairman was the Committee’s agreement to take a more systematic approach when looking at recommendations from past Inquiries and ask the question “do we as a Committee make a difference?” Individual Members are re-visiting commitments made by Ministers to Reports produced over the past five years to see if they were carried out – a process which I would like to see formalised across the Select



Committee structure.

Of course the real excitement comes from the oral evidence sessions. Michael Jopling, the former cabinet minister, once said, “Select Committees are giving backbenchers teeth with which to challenge the executive”. He was right. There is a real sense of engagement with Ministers that I have previously never felt at departmental questions in the Commons and a willingness to engage in the subject under scrutiny. The same excitement comes from examining the evidence or responsibilities of other witnesses too.

To hear Olympic sprinter Linford Christie present his views on doping in sport at our seminar to launch the “Human Enhancement Technologies in Sport” Inquiry or Alasdair Smith, the Vice Chancellor of Sussex University, defending his policy to close a Chemistry Department brings the work of the Committee alive and makes it immediately relevant.

So what of the future? Well let me begin by acknowledging the tremendous support given to me by Members of the Committee and by an exceptional group of Clerks, scientific specialists and support staff. Despite having to work without two Members for most of that time the co-operation and engagement has been quite superb. We immediately begin work in October on a new Inquiry into “Space” and whilst a Committee visit has been ruled out, this should prove to be an extremely topical and exciting inquiry for any new member who wishes to join the Committee!

Last year was truly “mission incredible” and this year promises more of the same!