

# PAIRING OF MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT WITH SCIENTISTS



Dr Brian Iddon with Dr Chris Knight, Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Manchester

It is becoming ever more important for scientists to communicate their work to the general public and to engage with Parliamentarians. A number of outside organisations, including learned societies and the Royal Society, have recognised this and have set up schemes to foster this engagement. Whether you are a member of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, someone who is engaged in the formation of science policy or a Member of Parliament (MP) with an interest in this policy area, I am sure that you will agree that those involved in making decisions about science

## Dr Brian Iddon, Member of Parliament for Bolton South East

related policy should be well informed.

Champions of science in Parliament are not in abundance, yet the science-related issues behind legislation before Parliament are becoming of increasing importance. Within the last 12 months MPs have dealt with the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, the Climate Change Bill and the Energy Bill, all of which contain complex scientific issues that needed addressing.

For several years now I have taken part in the Royal Society's MPs 'pairing scheme', a scheme which aims to bridge the gap between Parliament and some of the best British young scientists. I have found this scheme invaluable for maintaining my links with the science community in my region and, for a small investment in my time, there are valuable rewards. The scheme has helped me, for example, with my work on the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (IUSS) Select Committee.

The policy process is not one-way. It is imperative that our young scientists have an understanding of how science policy is made within Parliament, when and how they can engage with the processes, and appreciate the work that goes into steering a Bill through Parliament. By giving those young scientists with whom we 'pair' an insight into Parliamentary procedures we will provide them with the knowledge to engage better in policy making in future, when they become the new leaders in our science community.

In the current session of Parliament I have been paired with Dr Chris Knight, an evolutionary biologist from the Faculty of Life Sciences at the University of Manchester. Dr Knight spent several days in Westminster, where he learned about the political processes by attending seminars organised by the Royal Society, attending our IUSS Select Committee meetings, attending Prime Minister's Question Time and

shadowing me in my day-to-day work. He has visited my constituency office and attended one of my busy Advice Surgeries. I think he was surprised by the variety of the work that I undertake and the many skills that we have to have as MPs in moving quickly from one subject to another.

I have visited Dr Knight's laboratories to find out about his work and to give a talk to his colleagues on 'Science in Parliament'. Dr Knight uses yeasts, which grow extremely rapidly, to investigate their evolution, especially in a toxic alcoholic environment. By growing yeast in increasing concentrations of alcohol he investigates how successive generations of yeast can develop a tolerance to it, ie how they evolve. Dr Knight's research has important applications, for example in teaching us how superbugs evolve in hospital environments, with a view to interfering with their evolution.

If, like me, you believe that all MPs, not just those with a scientific background, should learn more about the importance of science in our policy making processes, then I encourage you to join the Royal Society's MPs 'pairing scheme'. I can assure you that you will find this a rewarding experience. Invitations to join the scheme in the next Parliamentary session will be sent to you by the Royal Society.

**The Royal Society's MP-Scientist pairing scheme has been running since 2001, with over 150 pairs taking part to date. Previous pairs have gone on to work together on local environmental issues, take part in events and write joint articles. A number of scientists have also gone on to have an active involvement in policy making through secondments to the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and Government Departments.**

**Next year the scheme will be expanded to include a civil-servant scientist pairing scheme, which will run alongside the existing MP-Scientist pairing scheme, as part of the Royal Society's aim to get independent scientific advice to the heart of Government.**

**If you are interested in taking part in the scheme or would like some more information, please contact us at [public.affairs@royalsociety.org](mailto:public.affairs@royalsociety.org)**