

# THE PARLIAMENTARY AND SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

## 70 Years of Bringing Science to Parliament

The Parliamentary and Scientific Committee came into being on 8th November 1939 as successor to the Parliamentary Science Committee, which had been dissolved with the resignation of its Secretary at the outbreak of war. By the end of January it was in funds and at work on an enquiry into the nutritive value of bread and an issue of *Science in Parliament* had been circulated to members early in January.

Since then, in war and peace, it has contributed steadily to the information and education of Parliament on the great scientific and technological issues of the day.

In 1943 the Committee's membership was made up of nearly 150 Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords and 43 Organisations (scientific institutions and research associations) of which several are still members today. Over the years membership has been extended to include UK members of the European Parliament, UK universities, trade associations and commercial companies operating in Britain, which are in the forefront of scientific and technological developments in their various fields of activity. In 2002 a new Associate category of membership was created to include those organisations which, though not engaged in scientific research, represent the interests of those who are significantly affected by science.

Over the decades the Committee has been involved in many important developments in the field of public policy relating to science and technology. In some of these it has played a key role, for instance on national policy for libraries and the utilisation of scientists in wartime. Members of the Committee were active, also, preparing the ground for the establishment of the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, which did much useful work between 1966 and 1979, and the setting up of the Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, which came into existence following the demise of the Commons Committee.

The Committee's most important role, however, has been in the dissemination of scientific and technical information. It has fulfilled this role over the years mainly through its monthly meetings at the House of Commons, through seminars and publications, notably *Science in Parliament*, which provides a record of addresses to the Committee and, through its website, the only regular digest of scientific and technological matters before the British Parliament and the European Community.

In 1988 the Committee took the giant step of establishing a new body to provide Parliamentarians with an independent source of high grade information – the Parliamentary Science and Technology Information Foundation, which founded and initially financed the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). Funds were raised for this charitable organisation from industry, institutions and from Parliamentarians themselves. The intention was that POST should become part of the Parliamentary

establishment; this took place in 1993, and POST is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.

Such has been the reputation and importance of the Committee over the years that it has drawn to it men and women of stature from both Parliament and the world of science and technology: among past Presidents have been Lord Samuel, Mr Herbert Morrison, Lord Halsbury, Lord Sherfield, Lord Zuckerman, Lord Shackleton, Lord Todd, Lord Gregson, Lord Flowers, Lord Selborne, Lord Waldegrave and Lord Soulsby. His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh has had a long association with the Committee, addressing the annual lunch on a number of occasions and acting as president during its fiftieth anniversary year.

The Committee currently has in membership about 140 parliamentarians from both the Westminster and the European Parliaments, 125 scientific and technical institutions, 40 universities, 35 industrial organisations and 4 associate members.

Expert speakers of great distinction in their fields come to speak at the Committee's monthly meetings at Westminster, and the Annual Luncheon provides each year the occasion for a major speech on some aspect of policy relating to science and technology. In addition to many eminent scientists, including at least two Nobel prizewinners, most Prime Ministers since 1939 have addressed the lunch, as have the Prince of Wales and the Princess Royal. The Committee also arranges visits to research establishments and other places of interest to members. In 2009, for the first time, it joined forces with several learned societies to run SET for BRITAIN, a poster competition and exhibition in the House of Commons for early-stage researchers.

The success of the Committee has encouraged the establishment of other specialist all-party groups within the Westminster Parliament and has led to the setting up of similar bodies abroad in Canada, Australia and India.

The Committee is the oldest of the almost 420 registered all-party subject groups in Parliament, and, while many of those formed most recently tend to be focused in narrow subject areas, it has remained the only group which continues to address all aspects of science and technology. Through its regular monthly meetings, and the dinner discussions which follow, it aims to provide Members of both Houses of Parliament with up-to-date information on the science behind topical issues.

*Science in Parliament*, which started as a duplicated circular containing summaries of debates and parliamentary questions, has developed into a 64-page journal published four times a year. Its twin objectives are to inform the scientific community of scientific activities within Parliament, and to keep Parliamentarians abreast of scientific affairs. The journal and details of the Committee's activities can be found on the website [www.scienceinparliament.org.uk](http://www.scienceinparliament.org.uk).

