

SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING AT THE HEART OF A FUTURE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT



Adam Afriyie MP

The expenses scandal shook Parliament to its core. The fallout has been extensive, and there are now justifiable calls for change.

One area of Parliamentary activity retains its vitality: science. Over the course of the year it has been a pleasure to work with POST (the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) to develop a programme of science literacy training for new Conservative MPs.

I was delighted to join with members of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee to campaign for a new science and technology committee. And it was enlightening to speak at the recent Parliamentary Links day in support of the annual exchanges between MPs and professional scientists.

These events reminded me that Britain is not just a nation of bankers and borrowers. We also have a proud scientific tradition. That tradition deserves recognition in public life on more than merely historic grounds.

I have hopes that the new Science and Technology Committee will rise to that challenge like its predecessors. In fact, there are at least three reasons why the committee will probably gain influence over the coming months and years.

First, the policy focus is quite rightly shifting away from the failed economic model of the past decade. Attention is quite rightly turning to the role that science and innovation can play in rebalancing our lop-sided economy. Effective scrutiny of government science policy will be essential in the years to come.

Second, with the latest machinery of government changes, science now competes for attention in a bigger department than ever before. With both the Science Minister and the Secretary of State tucked away in the Lords – distant from the usual Commons scrutiny – I will certainly look to the select committees for help in holding ministers to account.

Third, Parliament will continue to rely on its select committees and organisations such as POST to underpin the rigour of scientific debate. In the course of the next Parliament, MPs may be required to tackle a range of tricky issues. This could involve anything from the presence of nano-particles on the high street to the use of genetic information by insurers. So Parliament will need a dedicated, cross-departmental select committee to weigh up the evidence and deliver sound recommendations.

This cross-departmental role is critical. Science is not restricted to just one Whitehall department. Whether it's social science in the Home Office or climate science in DECC, ministers, officials and Parliamentarians all depend on reliable scientific advice.

Science and engineering belong at the heart of government policy, and I am deeply conscious of the contribution they will make to a future Conservative government. That's why I am taking action now to raise the profile of the STEM subjects in the Conservative Party.

At this year's party conference I will be launching the Conservative Friends of Science. The idea has been greeted warmly and enthusiastically, and we're delighted that Simon Singh has agreed to say a few words at the reception. The group will provide a forum for Parliamentarians, party activists, corporate and individual members to debate scientific issues and inform policy. And it will enable members to help promote the STEM subjects alongside the many organisations already active in the field.

Effective policy is based on sound evidence. That's why science and engineering matter. The Conservative Friends of Science will be making a strong case for science and engineering at the heart of Conservative policy-making.

Adam Afriyie is the Conservative MP for Windsor and Shadow Minister for Science and Innovation.

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