

# WHITHER SCIENCE IN PARLIAMENT?



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**I can hardly believe that it is 65 years since I graduated in medicine. During my professional career I was much involved in clinical neurological practice and in teaching, but also undertook and supervised many research projects, principally in the field of neuromuscular disease, involving many aspects of genetics and biomedical science.**

Since I was privileged to become a Crossbench Life Peer

in 1989, I have taken a keen interest in parliamentary debates dealing with medicine, science and education, and have much enjoyed my membership of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, as its meetings have invariably been informative, stimulating, and even at times provocative. My interest in neuromuscular disease led me to become heavily involved in debates in the Upper House on issues relating to human fertilisation and embryology and stem cell research to quote but two examples.

Inevitably, during my parliamentary career I have enjoyed many scientific discussions with members of both houses, and I was privileged to serve for almost 14 years in total on the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, and to chair three disparate enquiries, examining international investment in UK science, research in the National Health Service and complementary and alternative medicine. Many reports of that Select Committee, and of its sister committee in the House of Commons, have had a major influence on government policy in the whole field of science, and I have much appreciated the seminal contributions of many members of the House of Commons who have become friends and valued colleagues. These have included, for example, Ian Gibson, former Dean of Biology at the University of East Anglia and former chairman of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, whose

treatment by his party, leading to his departure from the House, was in my opinion disgraceful. Others contributing cogently to scientific debate have been Brian Iddon, a noted chemist, Des Turner, a botanist with a higher degree in biochemistry, and Doug Naysmith, a zoologist, with a PhD in surgical science and immunology, to quote but three. And while Phil Willis MP originally qualified in education rather than in science, he has proved an able and influential chairman of the Commons Committee on Science and Technology, and more recently of the Committee on Innovation, Universities and Skills. Ian Taylor MP, graduating originally in politics and modern history, has also contributed effectively to scientific debates, succeeding Doug Naysmith as Chairman of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. Other MPs, not themselves scientists, who have taken an active interest in scientific issues are Bob Spink, Robert Key and Tim Boswell. Plainly, too, my medical colleagues, such as Howard Stoate, Richard Taylor and Evan Harris, have been effective contributors to scientific debate. Sadly, we have now lost a valuable contributor due to the untimely death of Ashok Kumar, a highly qualified engineer with a PhD in fluid mechanics.

Most disturbing is the fact that Evan Harris and Richard Taylor have lost their seats and most of the others whose names I have quoted have stood down. Having examined the backgrounds of the new Members of Parliament, it has been difficult to identify many

who will fly the scientific banner in the new House of Commons, as so many are graduates in politics, economics, business, finance, philosophy, law and the humanities. Surely it is inconceivable that we may be faced with a scientifically illiterate House.

When I was a young doctor, my senior colleague, the late Dr Henry Miller, often said that as one ages, instead of giving technical and scientific lectures, it is customary to deliver what he called 'Whither Lectures', examining in a semi-philosophical sense the future of one's speciality. This is why I have chosen this title for an 'Opinion piece'. My concerns are heightened by question as to whether the remarkable scientific expertise now available in the Upper House, where we have one past and one current President of the Royal Society, as well as numerous distinguished exponents of the STEM disciplines of science, technology, engineering and maths (and of course medical science) will be available to serve Parliament if, as the three main political parties now wish, the Upper House is to be replaced by either a wholly elected or a substantially elected chamber. As I approach my 88th birthday I imagine that my years of service in the House of Lords will soon be drawing to a close, but my concern, escalating as so many noted exponents of and supporters of science are standing down from the Commons, have led me to ask anxiously 'Whither Science in Parliament?'