

ROYAL SOCIETY PAIRING SCHEME

The Royal Society runs an annual Pairing Scheme for MPs or civil servants and Royal Society Research scientists. It starts with the 'Week in Westminster' in late October, a programme of activities for the scientists including seminars, workshops, shadowing opportunities and a tour of Westminster. This week aims to give the scientist a taste not only of the approach to science policy but of Parliament and the Civil Service in general.

Gisela Stuart MP and Dr Joanna Parish relate their experiences.



Gisela Stuart MP

I have found the "pairing scheme" of great benefit to me – but not necessarily for the reasons I'd expected. I had hoped, and indeed did, learn more about Birmingham University from the view of someone working there.

But what I had not expected was the mirror that was constantly held up – I had to find answers to the simple questions of "how" and "why".

... Politics isn't a science ...

Politicians like to share their certainties. Voters aren't interested in our doubts. They have enough of their own.

So for us things are black or white, good or bad, right or wrong; but I rarely get quizzed, nor indeed cross examined, on how I arrived at my view.

Politics isn't a science and electoral politics even less so. Local circumstances, history, expectations, behaviour of the opposition – all these things come into play. But there does need to be a factual basis. Our

policies may have unintended consequences, but we need to buckle down and try and forecast how to bring them into line with our social beliefs. This would be fatal to a real scientist. But they too have hunches, and I am sure that they too on occasions come up with good post hoc explanations. Maybe that is the sign of genius.

It was fun to share my world of work with bright young women like Jo Parish, who I am sure will rise to the top of her profession. I will watch her progress with interest.



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As part of the Royal Society MP Pairing Scheme, I spent a week shadowing Gisela Stuart MP. I am a Royal Society University Research Fellow and study the life cycle and molecular biology of the cancer causing human papillomavirus (HPV). Having completed my PhD in 2002, I moved to America to work as a postdoctoral scientist for 5 years before returning to the UK to establish my own research group. Until I gained independence as a scientist in 2007, I was blissfully unaware of how internal and external politics

affected my ability to carry out cutting edge research and deliver high-quality teaching. Now I seem to struggle against a wave of political decisions, particularly in the wake of this year's Research Excellence Framework assessment and therefore wanted to discover how these policies that so greatly affect my ability to be creative and individual in my research are reached within government.

Policies founded within government have a huge impact on my research. For example, government largely influences how my research is funded. It is getting harder and harder simply to follow ideas and hypotheses, a path that many great scientists throughout history have taken. Now we must study questions that fall into priority areas if we are to attract funding from research councils. Likewise, the ability to utilise human tissue is licensed through policies

... blissfully unaware of politics ...

developed with Parliament, policies that seem to have hindered not helped our ability to use tissue samples to study disease processes. For several years I have become interested in how policies which influence research into human health and disease are adopted within Parliament and how these shape the way academic research is conducted within the UK. When I was given the opportunity to take part in the MP Pairing Scheme I realised that this would give me the chance to talk to politicians and learn about decision making processes and how I can influence them. I also hoped that the politicians I met would learn from my experiences as an academic scientist and begin to understand how parliamentary decisions influence academic research.

... questions that fall into priority areas ...

I was not disappointed! Through a well-planned series of presentations from key individuals associated with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), the House of Commons and Lords Science and Technology Select Committees, the House of Commons Library, the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, the UK Foresight Team, the Government Office for Science and BIS, and Professor Sir John Beddington CMG FRS we were talked through the many offices and committees that are involved in making decisions and how the findings of this research are used to influence society. I was

... events that have required a rapid response ...

particularly inspired by Sir John Beddington's presentation. He talked us through his role in providing scientific advice to government with several pertinent examples of events that have required a rapid response in order for the government to react swiftly and appropriately.

Following a day and a half of seminars, we were given time to shadow our MP pairs and attend select committee meetings and Prime Minister's Questions. PMQs was without doubt the most surprising element of my time in Westminster! I knew that debates within the House of Commons are hectic, but two

things really shocked me. Firstly the Commons chamber is remarkably small – the opposing sides are much closer to each other than the images on the television would suggest. Secondly, the volume of the heckling and seemingly chaotic speed at which the questions were asked and answered was startling. I am amazed that this is the way our government debates the most important issues. Scientists are far more civilized, but it was great fun to watch!

Shadowing Gisela has also been a very worthwhile experience. She works incredibly hard and seemingly never switches off from parliamentary

issues. She was proactive in the MP Pairing scheme and allowed me to shadow her for the majority of my free time. I attended a briefing dinner with the Fleet Commander and Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sir George Zambellas, which was enjoyable and very interesting. I also sat in on several select committee meetings, observed television

... Scientists are far more civilized ...

and radio interviews within the studios at Millbank and worked with Gisela's intern on some research required for a piece Gisela was writing. Above all this, my most valuable experiences stem from sitting and chatting with Gisela for lunch or coffee. We had many insightful conversations and discussed the workings of Parliament and her role as an MP. Sitting in Portcullis House or the House of Commons refectory allowed me to observe life in Westminster from a unique angle. As with science, many of the important interactions that occur between politicians happen in the cafeteria and it was great to be able to see these interactions play out in front of me.

The structured sessions during the week were vital for me to understand the role of the various committees and

offices within government and how these work together to form evidence-based policies and also to prioritise academic research. However, it was the time I spent shadowing my MP that was the most valuable to me. I am very grateful for the amount of time and effort Gisela afforded me. I would encourage all MPs and Civil Servants to consider taking part in the pairing scheme, but only to do so if they are prepared to commit to it. I hope Gisela found it as enjoyable and educational as I did and I am

looking forward to her visiting my research lab and teaching her more about academic research. I have learnt so much about our government and will take this knowledge away with me, fully motivated to engage more with Parliament in the future. Furthermore, I have made a friend and hope the relationship Gisela and I have developed continues in the long term. Perhaps it is friendships like this that will help develop firm links between politicians and scientists, links that are important if we are to make best use of academic research in society.

... I have learnt so much ...

