

# VOICE OF THE FUTURE

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House of Commons Science and Technology Committee

The Voice of the Future was a concept pitched to the Science and Technology Select Committee by Dr Stephen Benn, a tireless campaigner within the science policy community. Currently employed by the Society of Biology, Dr Benn first came to the Committee with the idea for Voice of the Future in 2012. He had a 'crazy' idea about the select committee being asked questions by young scientists and possibly even the Science Minister.

There were several practicalities. A select committee is not a free for all question fest and to be truly within the Committee's interests there had to be some element of scientists learning about how a committee works. Having been sold on the idea, the Committee was keen to promote the connection between scientists and the policy that set the framework within which they operated. Dr Benn set about the potential of adding the Minister.

In the end, he secured not only the Minister but the Shadow Minister and even the Speaker of the House of Commons to open the event.

The first Voice of the Future in 2012 was a great success. Everyone turned up, questions were asked and answered and it was broadcast on BBC Parliament. It did not, however, do everything envisaged. It was not broadcast live, which made commentary and receipt of questions much more difficult. Neither did it have the Chief Scientific Adviser answering questions. There were also a whole range of practical issues that only emerge when you actually try to DO something.

The second event in March 2013 showed progress. There was a better handling of questions; more organised

distribution of those questions amongst participants; live broadcasting, from both the parliament website and from BBC Parliament; and it featured the participation of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser. This was more like the success sought for the first event.

While the key concept of young scientists asking questions seems an easy one, there is a huge set of logistics in gathering together the questions, making sure as many of the learned societies as possible get the spotlight, ensuring the questions are appropriate for the context, and in deciding who will ask



The Speaker opened the event, seen with Stephen Benn

what question. Our learning on questions was not about making them appropriate; it was about trying to ensure people were aware they would be asking a question, and that they would be in place at the right time. It would be almost as pointless asking politicians about details of science as asking scientists about Parliamentary procedure. You might get an answer, it may even be correct, but it would be unlikely to provide any insight.

The questions are submitted via learned societies and are chosen for particular witnesses, edited to make them easier to read out, and for witnesses to understand, grouped into



themes and allocated to individuals. As far as possible the original sense of the question is retained. There is a very limited amount of time and a desire to allow as many people as possible to ask a question. That meant that there was rarely time to facilitate supplementary questions.

It may not be surprising but common themes through the submitted questions were participation of women and science careers. I think these were the hardest questions to answer because the solutions need to address problems that are systemic, chronic and of concern to those asking the questions in the most fundamental way.



Rt Hon David Willetts MP, Minister for Universities and Science

The Science Minister, Rt Hon David Willetts MP, set out the compromises to be made in the provision of university education and the support for early academic careers, and where other countries had made different decisions. He pointed out that just because a scientist was not in academia did not mean that they were not pursuing a scientific career. All agreed that a way had to be found to



Sir John Beddington, Government Chief Scientific Adviser

ensure women are better represented at the high tables of science. Pamela Nash MP possibly hit the nail on the head when she indicated that science has probably gone further along that line than Parliament. This may be something scientists and universities need to sort out, rather than government and politicians.

As one of the organisers, I believe that Voice of the Future was a success. It is amazing that, on budget day, a Minister, a



Shabana Mahmood MP, Shadow Minister for Universities and Science

shadow Minister and eight Select Committee Members prioritised their time to attend. That shows commitment from our political classes. I was also impressed with the number of young scientists willing to spend a morning away from the lab to talk policy. We need that engagement.

What needs to change? We have some way to go to ensure that the scientists attending leave with an appreciation of what Parliament is and what they can expect from it. The format needs some tweaking. If there was one aspect that participants found difficult (garnered from a



Sarah Newton MP and Stephen Metcalfe MP

few after event conversations and twitter commentary) was that the questions were too 'stand alone'. The politicians were not subjected to intense scrutiny.

This is part of the learning that takes place after each iteration. It would be interesting to hear from the learned societies, and from those who attended, about what is important. Time is limited and there are many people who would like to be involved.

What is more important? Is it better to cover a range of issues with less follow-up and more people involved or would it be better to focus on a smaller range of issues that provide fewer people a better chance to challenge responses?

Voice of the Future is an important platform for scientists and politicians to talk science. I hope that this year's event was better than last year's and that we will see continued improvement in both the format and in the engagement from the science community.

To watch Voice of the Future, go to <http://www.parliament.uk/science/> and follow the link to Voice of the Future 2013 on the S&T Select Committee's homepage.



The Select Committee