

PARLIAMENTARY LINKS DAY 2020 PUBLIC TRUST IN SCIENCE

By Dr Stephen Benn, Director of Parliamentary Affairs, Royal Society of Biology

Parliament's flagship science event – Parliamentary Links Day – took place for the first time in its 33 years *online* on Tuesday 14 July 2020.

A remarkably wide and distinguished group of people from Government, Parliament and the scientific community took part in this year's event.

As can be seen from the invitation Links Day is organised by the Royal Society of Biology on behalf of a wide range of the scientific community including all the core sciences.

An Early Day Motion – co-sponsored by the Father of the House Sir Peter Bottomley MP and signed by Members on all sides – was tabled on the Commons *Order Paper* congratulating the Royal Society of Biology on its role in organising Links Day.

This year the theme was **Public Trust in Science** with discussions dominated by the high-profile research and scientific advice that has been central to the UK's pandemic response.

Links Day was co-sponsored on a cross party Parliamentary basis by Stephen Metcalfe MP, Chi Onwurah MP, Carol Monaghan MP and Layla Moran MP – and the morning's session was chaired by Stephen Metcalfe.

Dame Eleanor Laing MP

He introduced Dame Eleanor Laing MP who as Deputy Speaker welcomed everyone on behalf of Parliament and



The Deputy Speaker welcomes everyone to Links Day 2020

launched the event from the House of Commons itself.

Amanda Solloway MP

The first Keynote Address was from Amanda Solloway MP, Minister for Science, Research and Innovation. Her message was that science is for everybody and that in her view, increased public engagement can only be a good thing.

PANEL DISCUSSION

There then followed the panel discussion between four of the country's most distinguished scientists: Professor Sir Venki Ramakrishnan, President of the Royal Society, Dame Anne Glover, President of the Royal



The Minister of Science Amanda Solloway MP

communicate value and the uncertainty of models, and how better public engagement, training and experience for research trainees can be best achieved. Sir Venki said that the public's "near complete compliance with lockdown,"

Chi Onwurah MP

The second Keynote Address was delivered by the Shadow Minister Chi Onwurah MP Shadow Minister for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. She said that lessons must be learned from the pandemic as it should be used an opportunity to change the direction and culture of innovation so it is more inclusive. She also emphasised that there needs to be high investment in education and lifelong skills.

Rt Hon Greg Clark MP

The morning session concluded with two sessions involving major figures from Parliament and Government. The first was with the current Chair of the Science & Technology Select Committee the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP. He spoke about the importance of transparency and, noting the "rehabilitation of experts", his view that there is going to be an increased role for science in public policy after this pandemic.



Sir David Spiegelhalter on the Panel with Sir Venki Ramakrishnan and Dame Anne Glover and with Dame Nancy Rothwell (not shown here)

Society of Edinburgh, Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester and Co-Chair of COST, and Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, Past President of the Royal Statistical Society.

Questions included whether trust has been damaged during COVID-19, the best ways to

despite its economic and social costs, "showed the trust that the public placed on scientific advice." He said scientists must continue their efforts to reduce conflicts of interest, increase transparency, and avoid group-think in order to uphold public confidence. "When we are rewarded by this trust we must show ourselves to be trustworthy. We must be clear that uncertainty is part and parcel of science and not blame science or scientists when the conclusions or the evidence changes."

Clark said that large numbers of people had watched the Government's scientific advisors being questioned by his select committee live on the BBC and Sky, and commended public health experts for taking part.

"It's gratifying that the hearings have attracted so much attention. Even though the scientists have a lot on their plate, it is important that we learn the lessons on the way, including those that can be applied later in the pandemic.



Opposition Shadow Minister Chi Onwurah MP

Being able to ask not just one but 10 questions on a particular topic is something that is unique to a select committee."

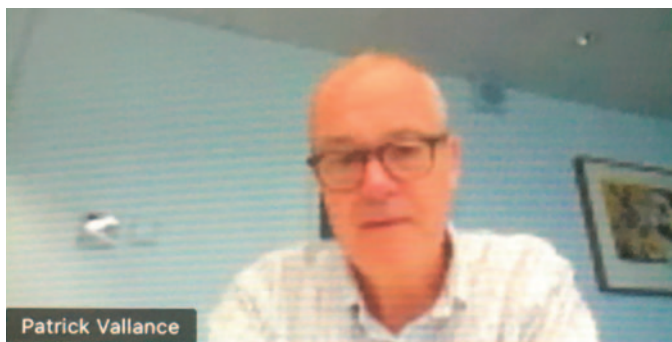
Sir Patrick Vallance

The morning session was concluded by Sir Patrick Vallance, the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser – whom as Stephen Metcalfe observed "needs no introduction".

Sir Patrick said that since the beginning of the pandemic in



A brace of Science & Technology Select Committee Chairs Stephen Metcalfe MP (Chair 2016-2017) and Rt Hon Greg Clark MP (Chair from 2020)



Sir Patrick Vallance – the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser

the UK the public are more likely to listen to scientific advice and that trust in science has increased. His experience of supporting government, especially through the pandemic, has led him to believe there is an absolute understanding that science is important across a range of policy areas. He noted that previously this had not always been the case. He was asked whether COVID-19 will change the way we conduct clinical research in the UK. He answered that it

will, in some ways, and gave as an example the rapid way in which funding agencies have been able to support research, which could lead to a reduction in bureaucracy.

Responding to questions Sir Patrick said the Government was wrong to initially keep the advice of the SAGE advisory board and the names of its members secret, but that the transparency shown since and further openness in sharing research and data would help boost trust and understanding and improve local policy responses.

This year's Links Day was originally supposed to be streamed live via YouTube (and a record number of people had signed up to watch) but the platform suffered a catastrophic failure on the day. Fortunately all the contributions are now available online at <https://www.youtube.com/royalsocbio> □

Parliamentary Links Day 2020

For the first time ever, join us as we host the biggest science event in the Parliamentary calendar online to discuss the public's trust in science.

Hear from MPs and sector leaders including Sir Patrick Vallance, Dame Eleanor Laing MP, Amanda Solloway MP, Chi Onwurah MP, Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell

Tue 14 July | 10:00-12:00 BST | Online

Register for free: rsb.org.uk/LinksDay20
Or join our live stream: youtube.com/RoyalSocBio

