

Draft article for web page

Report on SfL AGM on Tuesday 27th October 2009

The main business of the meeting was to receive reports from the Chair, Secretary and Treasurer and to elect the new office bearers as follows:

Chair John Unsworth (unsworth@post.com),

Vice Chair Steve Keevil,

Secretary Paul Connell (snippy-connell@hotmail.co.uk),

Membership Secretary Ann Kingsbury,

Editor of Science Matters Paul Connell,

Webmaster Willie Russell (assisted by Julian Crowe),

Socialist Societies Representative David Caplin.

EC members: Bobbie Nichols, Frances Downie, Martin Yuille, Nigel Titchen,

Peter Stern, David Taplin

After a short talk from Simon Singh an emergency resolution was passed viz:

SfL welcome the news of the Simon Singh's successful appeal against his preliminary judgement so that he can continue to fight his case against the British Chiropractic Association. SfL supports the campaign run by Sense about Science for reform of the Libel Laws in matters of scientific integrity and reporting.

A discussion on *Priorities for Science Funding*

This was opened by **Brian Iddon MP** who has a wealth of experience through his long-standing membership of the Commons Science & Technology Select Committee (in all its various incarnations). We all have our concerns as to how a possible Tory government would treat science, and something of the flavour can be gained from the fact that attendance by Tory members (with just one or two exceptions) of the S&T Committee is very poor.

Brian is well aware that universities and research councils are preparing for substantial cuts in next year's budgets; he himself is pushing for research funding to be ring-fenced. All will become clear(er) when the Comprehensive Spending Review is published ahead of the Queen's Speech on 18 November

He listed the priorities for the S&T Committee over the next few months: Research by the pharmaceutical industry in the UK seems to be diminishing, perhaps because of high costs here, or possibly stricter regulation. Synthetic biology and bioengineering deserve attention. The government needs a proper audit of Civil Service scientists and their skills. Concerns over possible downgrading, perhaps via privatisation, of Public Analysts.

Tom Blundell – another of our Patrons – is qualified many times over to speak to this central issue. He portrayed his personal journey in his presentation with a research career starting in the footsteps of J. D. Bernal, and supervised for his doctorate by Dorothy Hodgkin; both these mentors maintained strong political links that helped illuminate their science, as Tom has done. Interestingly, in addition to leading him to the scientific summit, Tom's research has got him deeply engaged with the pharmaceutical industry,

and directly involved with a highly-successful start-up based on blue-skies research of the 1980s.

As part of the boost to science funding when the Labour Government came to power, the whole question of the links between blue-skies science and the rest of the economy was looked at in detail; the outcomes included the Lambert Review on Knowledge Transfer in 2003 and the Science and Innovation 10 Year Framework of 2004, and now the Research Excellence Framework. Currently, business investment in R & D, and more generally in the UK science base has stalled. Of course, the credit crunch has been the overwhelming negative factor, but the longer-term concern is that there is little indication of those links being strengthened. The tendency of government to respond with carrots and sticks through “impact factors” and other metrics raises many concerns.

Tom took as an example the pharmaceutical industry, where the temptation is to conduct research through largely automated high-throughput screening of candidate compounds. This approach is very inefficient (he cited an example for a particular clinical target :8,000 compounds were selected from a screen , leading to eight clinical trials, and just one drug to market), and consequently enormously expensive, and so is exposed to an unfavourable economic climate.

In contrast, the blue-skies approach can be much more efficient, through awareness by bench scientists of the needs of industry, the crucial element being person-to-person networking on a small and informal scale. Tom’s own career progression is an outstanding example of the value of that networking. He also pointed out that it was important to develop regional policies on the same lines to counteract the concentration of resources in London and the Southeast band noting that the availability of cultural centres was also a key factor.

Martin O’Neill is currently a member of the House of Lords Science & Technology Committee. Previously, he was Chair of the Commons Trade & Industry Committee, which also looked at technology transfer issues. Outside parliament, he is Chair of the Nuclear Industries Association. Wearing that hat, and looking at a possible revival of nuclear generation, he expressed concerns about the loss of key infrastructure in the nuclear industry; much of that loss was a consequence of privatisation. Outside of military (submarine) reactors, there is almost no UK reactor expertise. He lamented the fact that there was now only one university running a course in nuclear engineering and hoped that other training centres would be available so that a resurgent nuclear industry would be able to employ UK graduates rather than utilising foreign expertise.

Nigel Titchen is a member of SfL’s Executive As a Vice-President of Prospect, the union formed by amalgamation of IPCS, IPMS and EMA (largely professional civil service unions), he reiterated Brian Iddon’s point about the government’s lack of knowledge of its own scientific assets.

As needs change, it is natural that the Public Sector Research Establishments should change. Sometimes, focussing is helpful, but too often reorganisation has been

destructive. The route of absorbing institutes into universities has sometimes been successful, but often they end up not being financially viable.

A particular concern is the Forensic Science Service, which looks to be facing the closure of three laboratories and the loss of 700 jobs, perhaps in preparation for privatisation. On the same note, the Tories have already announced their intention to privatise the Meteorological Office – a key resource for long-term climate change science!!

The meeting was also addressed by **Stephen Timms** the Financial Secretary to the Treasury who is also responsible for Digital Britain. He had a heartening message of support from the government for SfL and reiterated that science and technology are key factors in the government's response to the credit crunch

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