



Cross-Party Debate on UK Science Policy 23/11/2009
Briefing note by the Campaign for Science & Engineering

Organised by the Cambridge Network, chaired by Prof Ian Leslie, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Cambridge.

Panel consisted of Jonathon Grant, President RAND Europe and

- Lord Drayson (Minister for Science & Innovation)
- Adam Afriyie MP (Shadow Minister for Science & Innovation)
- Dr Evan Harris MP (Liberal Democrat Science Spokesman)

Written from CaSE notes on the speeches before the debate and answers to questions. Please let us know if there are any inaccuracies.

Making “science an election issue”

Lord Drayson

- Has this as a goal, wants to raise the profile of science with quality science journalism and make the “nation comfortable with and good at science”.
- Good to have general agreement across parties.
- Science will be in the manifesto, like last time.

Adam Afriyie

- Science policy should be the political area least driven by ideology.
- Should get science in manifesto.
- Would like to see science an election issue but believes it will naturally arise out of other key issues.

Dr Evan Harris

- Good to have agreement as more discussion is needed to tease out differences.
- Will try to get a science in manifesto.

Funding - Absolute Levels & Ring-Fence

Lord Drayson

- Repeated Gordon Brown's commitment to maintained growing investment in science. Committed to the ten year framework and maintaining the ring-fence. Said that opposition parties haven't made clear funding and ring-fencing commitments.

Adam Afriyie

- It would be “reckless to make undeliverable promises” on size of budget. Sensible that parliament approve the science budget separately from departmental spending. Conservatives very supportive of science but opposition parties lack information to make financial commitments. Key question is how to make the economy strong enough to enable investment in science.
- Is “comfortable with ring-fence”, “committed to principle of ring-fence”, but what matters is what is in it. Science needs long-term funding – but can't ring-fence something that hasn't been allocated. “Will not turn the science budget into a short term industrial subsidy.”

- There is a public role for funding long-term research, fundamental research and large scale projects.

Dr Evan Harris

- UK is not investing enough to compete. Need to safe-guard funding for science – will argue for ring-fence – how can you have long-term view without it?

Funding - Priorities, Impact & Haldane Principle

Lord Drayson

- Haldane principle works and is useful “shorthand”– fund on basis of excellence – got us to the good place we are in. Ministers can highlight key challenges, scientists decide who gets funding.
- Need to see more cross-departmental R&D budgets – Treasury is interested...

Adam Afriyie

- There should be a distinction between appropriate strategic guidance and inappropriate political interference. We need the Haldane principle or something like, clarified by an inquiry, commission or consultation.

Dr Evan Harris

- The Government is entitled to decide to allocate funds to certain scientific or geographic areas – but must be transparent – should publish letters to the research councils.
- Don't think maximising impact of research done should dictate research. Should maximise what you find, but shouldn't be used to decide funding. Time wasted playing application game.
- Need a better measure of productivity than papers/citations – these suggest we are good at doing it on the cheap. Look at numbers trained.

Innovation

Adam Afriyie

- Need to “rebalance the lopsided economy”. Science holds the key, but UK has tumbled down international league table for competitiveness – UK should be top exporter of high-tech. Sir James Dyson will be looking into this. How can we: encourage the brightest into science, maintain the research base and close the gap between discovery and development.
- Science need stability, Conservatives would retain dual funding and current apparatus of science policy – no major reworking here. Welcomes the Technology Strategy Board. Need people, businesses and universities free to innovate – not through picking winners.

Lord Drayson: Office for Life Science is a good model.

Skills

Lord Drayson

- Need to pay scientists more – why is market not reflecting true value? Have had some successes getting bankers into teaching in recession.

Adam Afriyie

- Conservatives are for technical schools, international benchmarking of exams, and online careers advice. Want to find the best way to attract students, evaluate current outreach and be open to simple/innovative ideas – e.g., the TV programme effect.
- Students need more info – online careers resource – one place – how many people are studying subject, how many jobs being advertised etc. Allows market to respond. Price tells you supply and demand. It's OK if scientists don't overtly or immediately work in science jobs – skills still valued.

Dr Evan Harris

- Problem with graduate debt, new graduates need high salary starter jobs and this deters them from entering into teaching and research etc. Would abolish top-up fees – need a graduate tax (income tax). Women have particular problems clearing debt and with short-term contracts – other European countries doing more to increase tenure positions. Don't need to work just through salaries. Also issues with stereotyping scientists.

Universities

Dr Evan Harris

- Would abolish top-up fees – need a graduate tax (income tax).
- UK has drifted into a market system for HE, but mostly funded by public money – how can it be appropriate to be spending so much on media studies rather than chemistry? Expanded places should go to strategic subjects like science and also important to make sure that there is local provision.

Adam Afriyie

- Universities are for research, teaching and spreading knowledge. Need to maintain level of independence – basic research must count – if spending tax money should contribute to growth – collaboration with industry is good. How do you get midstage research to market?

Lord Drayson

- UK universities very good at teaching – careful how they change but need to recognise the competition for talent. Focus on excellence and university and departmental level, will be more concentration. Need to value communication more.

Scientific advice & Evidence-Based Policy Making

Adam Afriyie

- At what stage in policy-making is science advice brought in – need scientists integrated. The Treasury and Cabinet Office do not have Chief Scientific Advisers. Very supportive of evidence-based policy making – all incoming Conservative MPs will be taking a science induction training course.
- Right that a minister has the power to dismiss an advisor on any grounds they see fit. New guidelines to be developed for ministers and advisers.

Dr Evan Harris

- Government should be explicit when going against scientific advice and don't shoot the messenger – after BSE said that Chief Scientific Advisers should not be concerned about giving controversial advice but look what's happened. Shortage of scientists in civil service problem.

Free Speech & Libel Laws

Dr Evan Harris

- Need wholesale reform of libel laws. Many Journal editors now consulting lawyers before publication.

Adam Afriyie

- Said this was a complicated issues.

Lord Drayson

- Jack Straw has said that he will look into this serious problem.

What would be your greatest achievement?

Adam Afriyie: Science advice integrated into early stages of policy making.

Dr Evan Harris: Every science lesson taught by someone with a degree in the subject.

Lord Drayson: Continue ring-fence and ten-year spending plan.

Press coverage

New Scientist: The S-Word blog, 24/11/2009

<http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/thesword/2009/11/uk-science-policy-thrashed-out.html>

Nature: What's in store for UK science? 24/11/2009

http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2009/11/whats_in_store_for_uk_science.html

Times Higher Education: Fears over future of science ring-fence. 25/11/2009

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=409261>

The Financial Times: At last - Tory reassurance on science, 23/11/2009

<http://blogs.ft.com/scienceblog/2009/11/23/at-last-tory-reassurance-on-science/>

(This is coverage of Adam Afriyie's speech at the start of the debate.)