



CaSE Briefing Note

17th May 2010

What the coalition could mean for science and engineering

Science and engineering did not feature greatly in the negotiation agreement underlying the formation of the new coalition government between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. This briefing looks at areas of agreement and difference in the two parties' manifesto commitments and additional commitments made in letters from David Cameron and Nick Clegg to CaSE and elsewhere. It also covers the most relevant new government appointments and outlines CaSE's post-election work.

Funding the Science & Engineering Research Base

The Liberal Democrats committed to not cutting science spending in the first year of the new Parliament.¹ They also stated that they would clearly define and then ring-fence science budget spending once it has been allocated.¹ The Conservatives promised a multi-year settlement, but did not specify funding levels.² In the third televised leader debate, David Cameron responded to a question on how to rebuild manufacturing industries by saying "Let's start with investing in our science base and making sure great universities like this [Birmingham] are producing the scientists and entrepreneurs of the future."

- CaSE will be campaigning for strong investment in science and engineering prior to the budget on June 22nd and the autumn spending review.

On how the money should be allocated, the Liberal Democrats support the Haldane Principle – that decisions on how the science budget should be spent are best made by those in the science community itself. At the same time, the government can identify broad strategic priorities in a transparent manner.¹ The Conservatives recognised some confusion in this area, promising to work with the science community to improve clarity.²

The Conservatives pledged to postpone the use of impact of prior research as a factor in funding allocations in the planned Research Excellence Framework. They promised that if a robust impact measurement acceptable to the academic community was not found, then none would be used.² The Liberal Democrats went a step further and opposed the use of non-evidence based impact predictions when allocating resources.¹

Support for Private Investment

Nick Clegg supported the target of 2.5% of UK GDP to be invested in research and development (R&D) from all sources.³ This would need increased private funding.

Both parties indicated that they will review R&D tax credits for industry, with the Conservatives pledging to simplify and refocus them on high-tech companies, small businesses and new start-ups.^{1, 2}

- CaSE will continue to argue that any changes need to be fully evaluated for possible repercussions and that any money taken out of the scheme, should support R&D investment elsewhere.

The Liberal Democrats were planning to look at how best to support industry investment, such as making seed funding more focused, or assisting venture capitalists in identifying

promising technologies.¹ Vince Cable spoke of creating a National Infrastructure Bank, bringing together public and private investment, while the Conservatives wanted to establish joint university-business research and development institutes.^{4,5} The Conservatives also said that they would aim to deliver 25% of government research and procurement contracts through small and medium sized enterprises.⁵

Both parties indicated that the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were at risk.

- RDAs spend around £300 million on science and innovation. If RDAs are cut, CaSE will argue that this investment in science and innovation should not be lost.

In the pre-election policy debates, the former science spokespeople of both parties gave oral commitments to continue to help finance the overheads of research funded by charities in universities and to support for the UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation.

Education & Skills

Both parties addressed the need for well qualified science teachers. The Conservatives said that only trainee teachers with a 2:2 class degree or above would receive funding. They would cover the student loan repayments of top science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) graduates while they are teaching.^{2, 6} The Liberal Democrats planned to divert the money currently used for starting bonuses for science and mathematics teachers into loan repayments. In the long run, they planned to abolish tuition fees.¹

The Liberal Democrats wanted to ensure that every single student can study three separate physics, chemistry and biology GCSEs while the Conservatives wanted this to be a basic curriculum entitlement.^{1,2} The coalition agreement agreed to promote the reform of schools to ensure that they have greater freedom over the curriculum.

- CaSE will be working to try to ensure that increasing freedom for schools does not mean that fewer of them offer students all of the sciences.

Both parties presented a range of ideas on how to boost the number of students taking STEM subjects at school and further into universities and apprenticeships. These ideas include prizes and technical academies from the Conservatives and better career advice, role models, bursaries and tackling the gender gap from the Liberal Democrats.^{1, 2, 5, 6}

The coalition agreement includes an annual limit on the number of non-EU economic migrants.

- CaSE will be looking at how this affects applicants for the different categories of visa and the implication for international scientists and engineers.

Science & Engineering in Government & Parliament

The Liberal Democrats made strong commitments on scientific advice and policy making. They endorsed the original Principles for the Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice, which underlines the independence and freedom of advisers to the Government. They pledged to appoint a Chief Scientific Adviser to the Treasury and reinforce the powers of the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, as well as strengthening the role of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). They also said that they would like to see regular use of Randomised Controlled Trials in testing new social policy initiatives.¹

The coalition agreement promised to establish a committee to bring forward proposals for a wholly or mainly elected upper chamber.

- CaSE will look at how this might affect the highly valued science and engineering expertise currently present in the House of Lords.

Other

The coalition agreement promises a review of libel laws to protect freedom of speech.

Key Government Appointments affecting Science & Engineering

- **Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)**

- Vince Cable as Secretary of State
- David Willetts as Minister of State for Universities and Science
- Mark Prisk & John Hayes also Ministers of State

Cable studied natural sciences with economics at Cambridge. While his background is not in the sciences, Willetts has often engaged with science issues in his former roles as Shadow Secretary for Education and then Innovation, Universities and Skills. In his 2007 CaSE Annual Distinguished Lecture, Willetts spoke of the relevance of science to all areas of society, as a basis for rational thought, and of how fundamental it is to our well-being. CaSE has already spoken to Willetts in his new role and a meeting is being scheduled.

Willetts will be attending Cabinet, but there has been no mention yet of the Cabinet level Science and Innovation sub-committee that the former Labour Science Minister chaired.

- **Department for Education**

- Michael Gove as Secretary of State
- Nick Gibb & Sarah Teather as Ministers of State

Gove has often emphasised the importance of improving STEM skills; he has spoken with CaSE and we have met his advisers. Sarah Teather has a natural science degree from Cambridge and worked at the Royal Society and for a research charity. CaSE had a productive meeting with Nick Gibb at the start of the year.

- **Treasury**

- George Osborne as Chancellor
- David Laws as Chief Secretary

CaSE has met with Osborne's advisers and communicated with Laws in his former role as shadow Minister for Education.

CaSE's Post-Election Work

- CaSE has written to incoming MPs about how they can be involved in science and engineering issues and how CaSE and others can support them.
- CaSE has written to the Leader of the House urging him to appoint a cross-departmental Science and Technology committee.
- CaSE is scheduling meetings with incoming MPs and the new Science Minister.
- A Nature editorial (May 13th) noted the need for non-partisan collaborative work, commenting on CaSE's positioning for this. We are meeting with members and collaborators on May 19th to discuss further post-election work.

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References

¹ Liberal Democrat response to the CaSE election letter

² Conservative response to the CaSE election letter

³ Nick Clegg speech to the Royal Society, January 2010

⁴ Vince Cable speech to Demos, January 2010

⁵ Conservative Election Manifesto

⁶ Conservative Education Manifesto 2010