

Leading Edge, BBC Radio 4, 28 June 2007

Despite all the talk of arguments between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, they have largely agreed with each other in general terms about the importance of science. Mr Blair has a gut instinct that a modern nation must be at the forefront of scientific discovery. Mr Brown has performed a more hard-headed analysis, and he knows that Britain can only succeed in the 21st Century by inventing and discovering things the rest of the world wants to buy.

Because these two political giants have agreed, there's no doubt that some aspects of science have done well in the last decade. Public money for research has increased dramatically, and companies that undertake scientific work get a discount on their tax bills. Most Government ministries now have a Chief Scientist, appointed from outside the civil service to bring rigour to the scientific aspects of issues like bird flu, national security and climate change.

But not everything in the science garden is rosy, and the new Government has some major challenges ahead. A million children in secondary schools are taught physics by people who are not properly-qualified physics teachers. Funding difficulties have led to the closure of excellent university departments, especially in chemistry.

Another big issue is that central Government control of scientific research has increased, with new bureaucracy and strings attached to almost every penny of funding. A couple of years ago, they even suggested that researchers must answer the question 'What is gravitation?' within five years. Where Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein had reached the limit of their enormous intellects, New Labour thought it could tell researchers to nail the issue before the next election!

The big challenges that face the country and the world, those that exercise Mr Brown's electorate, are now all dominated by science and technology – the environment, national security, the ageing population, transport and healthcare. Rather than firefighting particular scientific problems, the Government needs a Cabinet that looks across science, engineering and research, understanding that they will be key not just to narrowly defined economic prosperity, but to our social, cultural and environmental wellbeing.

If we get it right, the benefits will be spread widely. Instead of complaining about the silly logo designed for the Olympics in 2012, we might start to see the event as a great chance to showcase the fantastic British engineering that will build new sporting facilities, and the sports science that will hopefully win us some gold medals. If Gordon Brown is still in office in 2012, that would be a good measure of whether his science policies have worked.