



Science question time in Wales

Report of a meeting at Cardiff University on 12 April 2005

For the **Conservative** party, **Simon Baker** (Parliamentary Candidate in Cardiff West) said that his party was committed to matching the Labour Government's proposals to increase the science budget. If his party was elected, there would be a science minister in the House of Commons and science would be dealt with on a cross-departmental basis, not pigeonholed in a corner of Government. The Conservatives would invest in facilities for teaching science, and would operate a low-tax regime, making R&D easier for the private sector.

Representing the **Liberal Democrats**, **Dr Simon Wakefield** (City Councillor and former Parliamentary Candidate) said that science and technology underpinned our way of life; the challenge of climate change would not be solved by media studies graduates. The problem of short term contracts in science should be addressed, and the public should be engaged more in the scientific world. The challenges of renewable energy, climate change and other environmental issues were major scientific issues and the Liberal Democrats have strong policies in this area, such as the target for zero municipal waste. The Liberal Democrats would scrap the DTI and move responsibility for science into the Department for Education.

The **Labour Party** was represented by **Win Griffiths** (MP for Bridgend from 1987 to 2005), who said that at school, he had not himself shown any aptitude for science, but that he was impressed by what science could achieve. The Labour Government had doubled the science budget, and there were now more science PhDs, and a few more science teachers. The UK had traditionally been good at having ideas but poor at exploiting them, and to stimulate more R&D, the Labour Government has introduced tax credits, and the UK has the lowest rates of corporation tax in the European Union.

Prof Delme Bowen, representing Plaid Cymru said that his party would always put the interests of Wales first. The Government had underinvested in science, and in the universities. Wales has 5% of the population of the UK, but does not receive 5% of public investment in R&D facilities. Investment should be strengthened and repositioned on new technologies. The Welsh Development Agency had become a beast of the Welsh Assembly; it should be able to act fast but anyone who had ever tried to get a quick response from the Assembly would know this was unlikely. Like some other parties, Plaid Cymru would abolish top-up fees.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR INCLUDED:

University fees and top-up fees have been introduced, abolishing the traditional view that education should be free. What does the panel think of free education?

Lab: Win Griffiths voted for top-up fees reluctantly, on the basis that the experience of New Zealand was that such fees did not deter people from going to university, and that the Government had agreed to review the system after three years. No country has a free system of higher education, and the universities needed extra sources of income. In science, the Labour Government had invested more money into the universities.

Con: As a mature student himself, Simon Baker understood the difficulty of funding a university education, and the Conservatives would scrap top-up fees. The target of 50% of young people going into university was arbitrary, and he knew of an instance of a woman from a 'normal background' who would leave university with debts of £40,000, which could not be right. Conservatives could fund their plans out of savings in the existing budget.

LD: Simon Wakefield reiterated that the Lib Dems would abolish fees and top-up fees (which they had already done in a coalition government in Scotland). People should not be deterred from education because of debt. If differential fees evolved, science courses would cost more than non-science courses, leading to an even greater disincentive for people to study science. We should not forget the Further Education sector, which is the Cinderella of the education system. The Lib Dems would fund their educational proposals out of an increased rate of tax on people earning over £100,000 a year.

PC: Many of the details of the Plaid Cymru policy were similar to those of the Lib Dems. For example, top-up fees would be abolished, paid for out of higher taxes on high earners. The target that 50% of young people should go to university was also a drain on the system; most people are not academic, and we had a shortage of plumbers and technicians.

Commercial funding for research was becoming more prevalent, partly because of Government policies on matching funds. Did the panel members worry about the potential loss of blue-skies research?

Lab: The Labour Government was investing in blue-skies research, and commercial companies were investing in other kinds of science. The two go together.

PC: There was no real conflict in Delme Bowen's experience, and industry sometimes funded work of a fundamental nature.

Lib: The Labour Government's funding policies were leading to boom and bust in research, with all the infrastructure being renewed at the same time, so that it would all decay at the same time. Responsive-mode funding – for new ideas - was no longer as available as it had been. Some research areas find it hard to get funding.

Con: The Conservatives have already committed to matching Government plans for public investment, but also see a major role for the private sector. Government is not the driver of innovation. Genetically-modified foods should not be planted until we understand their full impact on the environment.

Genetically-modified foods may have the potential to feed starving people. Should we deny them that possibility because of our concerns about GM technology?

LD: Food shortages may not really exist; there is a bigger problem of distribution, and the food crisis could be solved with recourse to GMOs. We do not want to use Africa as an experiment.

PC: GM has tremendous potential for curing ills and feeding people, but we do not know the risks, and until we know more, research should be confined to the laboratory. Once the cat was out of the bag, it could not be returned.

Con: There is no problem of food production, but a political problem of getting food to where it is needed. There should be a ban on commercial planting of GM crops in the UK until more research has been performed, so it is not fair to ask other parts of the world to accept them.

Lab: Win Griffiths was personally not as keen on GM as some in his party. But he understood that some genes could be introduced to make foods healthier, and would not rule out using GM crops in the future. But in the developing world, there were bigger problems that could be solved in other ways.

What do the members of the panel think will be the big scientific issue of the coming Parliament.

Con: In the spirit of honesty, Simon Baker admitted he did not know.

LD: Climate change, as expressed by the Government's Chief Scientist, Sir David King, who had said that this was a bigger global problem than terrorism.

PC: Funding for further and higher education; science in schools; the whole issue of human genetics, including stem cells and cloning; and climate change.

Lab: Exciting children about science in schools; climate change, the controversy over the issue of science in schools; and the whole issue of medical technology and, for example, the patenting of natural products.