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CaSE
Campaign for Science and Engineering

David Cameron's letter to CaSE – Election 2010

Below is the Conservative response from David Cameron to the CaSE letter to the leaders.

Monday, 5th April 2010

Dear Hugh,

It is good of you to get in touch on what is an absolutely critical issue. Your belief in the importance of science and engineering is one that I share, and I am delighted to be given this opportunity to set out some of our ideas in this area.

Britain has a long and proud history of innovation. Our universities rank among the very best in the world, and we are second only to the United States in terms of citations and Nobel Prizes. But we need to face up to some big challenges if we're to have an even more illustrious future. The fact that we are now emerging from the longest and deepest recession on record only adds to the importance of getting this right.

We need to inspire greater numbers of young people to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and maths. We need to translate more of our world-class research into world--beating British products. And we need to secure the right economic conditions for businesses to create more well-paid jobs. I am confident that with the right leadership, Britain has huge potential to succeed.

At our Party Conference last October, I set a clear objective: to create the conditions for Britain to become Europe's leading high-tech exporter. This objective is absolutely central to our wider plan to build a re-balanced economy in the wake of the recession. We have already published Sir James Dyson's report, Ingenious Britain, and our own eight Benchmarks for Britain, setting out our vision for a new economic model built on saving, business investment and high-tech exports. We have also published the first ever Technology Manifesto, bringing together policies to make Britain the most technology-friendly country in the world.

I think you'll agree that these policies, some of which I have detailed below, will deliver the energy, leadership and values needed to realise this ambitious, but achievable, aim.

1. Strengthening science skills

To provide real incentives to get ignore good science teachers into our schools, we will pay off the student loan obligations of top STEM graduates for every year they spend in the classroom. We will also launch an immediate programme to overhaul the National Curriculum in the core subjects of English, Maths and Science, developing a new curriculum on the assumption that studying three separate sciences should be a basic curriculum entitlement, not an elite activity. And we will raise the status of technical skills in our society by expanding the apprenticeship programme so that 14-16 year

olds have access to genuinely vocational qualifications and establishing new Technical Academics in each of the twelve largest cities in England, with the long-term ambition of having one in every area of the country.

2. Maintaining the quality of the research base

The public spending environment is constrained, and we need to think very carefully about how government can deliver more for less. But we recognise that research programmes may run over several years and that PhDs take time to complete. A Conservative government would initiate a multi-year Science and Research Budget to provide a stable investment climate for Research Councils. And we will postpone the Research Excellence Framework by up to two years while we review the evidence behind this new system.

The Government's plan to tie a quarter of research funding to a measurement of the past 'impact' of a university's research is causing uncertainty in the academic community. There are real questions over how accurately 'impact' can be measured, how well it can be applied to various disciplines, and what effect the proposals will have on blue sky research. If we can find an impact measurement that is robust and accepted by the academic community, then we would adopt that. If not, we would remove it from the framework.

3. Creating economic opportunities

To build a more balanced economy, we will need to support our most promising high-tech sectors. As we said in our Technology Manifesto, we will re-establish clear national policy leadership for key technology sectors such as aerospace, pharmaceuticals, IT, the creative industries, high-value manufacturing and high-tech engineering.

We see a strong role for the Technology Strategy Board, working alongside the Research Councils and at arm's length from Ministers, to identify key sectors and support new business opportunities through procurement competitions and challenge funding. We will also retain R&D tax credits but will simplify and refocus them on high-tech companies, small businesses and new start-ups in order to stimulate a new wave of technology.

4. Responding to wider challenges

Some issues require a special focus. So we would encourage the Research Councils to work together to meet big scientific challenges, such as climate change and our ageing population. Of course, we must preserve the independence of the science community, and because we can't reliably predict the outcomes of individual pieces of research, it is right that funding is channeled through the Research Councils.

The Government called for a debate about national research priorities but pushed on with its own Strategic Investment Fund. In doing so, it has broken faith with the research community. I want to restore that faith. Scientists are the best people to determine where true scientific priorities lie. That's why we would work with the science community to arrive at a clearer definition of the Haldane Principle. This principle – that decisions on individual research proposals are best delegated to scientific experts – has never been comprehensively written down and is now under strain as never before.

We would, of course, look to CaSE and others to help us develop a clear framework for science and innovation policy, at a time when the science community faces increasing pressure to meet political and economic priorities.

5. Science advice in government

Part of the process of rebuilding trust in politics means making sure that scientific advice is respected. We must not repeat the mistakes of the BSE, GM and the MMR episodes, which did a great deal to undermine public trust. The last Conservative Government established the Foresight programme to identify new technological challenges on the horizon. I want the next Conservative Government to act early, sensitively and intelligently so that scientific research can move forward within the boundaries set by Parliament. Indeed, we have already announced plans to operate a programme of science literacy inductions available to all new Conservative Members of Parliament after the election.

It is absolutely vital that the UK develops and builds on its outstanding record in science and engineering. Achieving this will require decisive action across the board: from our schools and colleges, to our research labs and science parks, and across Whitehall.

These policies form the core of our vision for vibrant science and engineering sectors, and represent a clear Conservative commitment to strengthening science skills, respecting science advice, maintaining the quality of our research, and creating the conditions for a high-tech economic recovery.

I know that these are all issues on which CaSE is campaigning on behalf of the science community. I look forward to continuing to work together in pursuit of our shared goals.

With best wishes

David Cameron
Leader of the Conservative Party