

Ulster Unionists respond to CaSE

Below is the response from Tom Elliott, Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, to the CaSE letter to the leaders, 18th April 2011.

STEM subjects had not been as high on the policy agenda in Northern Ireland than in other regions of the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland for many years. Nevertheless the Ulster Unionist Party took the decision that when we took up the Employment and Learning Ministry in May 2007 we would change this.

We recognise that the science and engineering research base is the foundation of many aspects of policy throughout government departments and consequently if we fail to pay it the attention that it deserves, in the long term we would only be limiting Northern Ireland's potential for growth.

As regards setting out a long term strategy for science and engineering in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party would support such an approach to create a vision for science and engineering and translate that into a programme for action.

Like many developed countries, recent generations of young people in Northern Ireland had been becoming increasingly disengaged from STEM subjects with a consequential reduction in the reducing enrolments in courses. Indeed it is a 2011 manifesto commitment of ours that we will continue to support strategies which promote enrolment in STEM subjects.

In order to halt this decline in the numbers of young people who were enrolling in STEM subjects, we proposed a systematic review of the subjects in the early years of primary school as well as continuing throughout to post-primary schools. The Ulster Unionist Party believe that all children in Northern Ireland should have access to a stimulating education in science and mathematics taught by appropriately qualified teachers.

Not only that but we believe that there needs to be action focused on improving the performance of pupils in STEM subjects, particularly science and mathematics. There also needs to be a programme of support for primary school teachers to ensure that they develop the confidence and enthusiasm to teach science in ways which motivate and engage pupils. We need to make learning in schools more investigative and enquiry based so the relevance of science and mathematics is related to everyday life.

The Ulster Unionist Party believe that science and engineering courses in Universities could be funded through various means such as STEM scholarships. Business, professional bodies and DEL should introduce prestigious scholarships in STEM subjects for students entering Further and Higher Education, targeted at retaining our most able STEM students following graduation.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that Northern Ireland's Universities are currently an attractive place for researchers from around the world to base their work, however, more can be done.

Northern Ireland's performance in Science at GCSE level in international student assessments is good, when compared to other countries and whilst less than 2% of the UK's Universities are in Northern Ireland, we have out performed counterparts in the rest of the UK in 41% of the science subjects that are represented in the province. However we need to continue to ensure that funding is made available to research and that certain subjects which are not currently represented, such as statistics and applied mathematics, as these have now been areas where research is needed.

Private sector investment in research and development could be achieved through encouraging business to develop and lead a framework of stakeholders which will engage directly with schools, Colleges, Universities and Government to promote STEM and create a willingness in the private sector to get involved in research and development in relation to science and engineering.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that lowering corporation tax and making Northern Ireland an economic enterprise zone will have the effect of attracting a number of industries, including science and engineering, to Northern Ireland.

Alliance Party respond to CaSE

Below is the response from David Ford, Leader of the Alliance Party, to the CaSE letter to the leaders, 18th April 2011.

As Northern Ireland starts to get back on its feet after the economic downturn, we must make sure that our economy is best adapted to take advantage of new opportunities in new markets and in new sectors. At the top of the list is research and innovation, which are key to making our economy competitive and would help facilitate economic growth.

But without employees who are trained with the skills to be able to work in research and other technology sectors then our economy will never grow. That is why encouraging the uptake of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects is critical to the future success of our economy. There must be investment in these subjects in schools, as well as increasing awareness amongst pupils of the importance and value of studying in these areas.

By ensuring collaboration between the business base and skills providers we can make sure that supply meets demand for a skilled workforce.

SDLP respond to CaSE

Below is the response from Margaret Ritchie, Leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, to the CaSE letter to the leaders, 18th April 2011.

1. [What commitments will your party make to ensure that science and engineering advice is at the heart of evidence-based policy making within government? What are your plans for setting out a long-term strategy for science and engineering in Northern Ireland? Will you commit to appointing a dedicated Science Minister and a Chief Scientific Advisor?]

The SDLP believes that government should widely consult in order to gather expert knowledge and opinion, to inform the decision-making process. For example, we rejected the flawed 2011- 2015 Budget, and proposed recasting the Budget so that all of the sectoral interests in society – government, business, trade unions, the community and voluntary sector, and wider civic society – enter into a contract on a set of negotiated economic and social outcomes.

In government, we would take a similar approach with experts from the science and engineering worlds in order to ensure that good evidence informs policy.

In the next Assembly, we want a serious debate with all parties on government reform, including on the number of Stormont departments and ministers. In this context, we would consider the appointment of a dedicated minister for science and a chief scientific advisor, if we believed this would best meet the economic and social needs of the people of the North.

2. [How will your party make sure that all children in Northern Ireland have access to a stimulating education in science and mathematics taught by appropriately qualified teachers? How will you sustainably fund science and engineering courses in your universities?]

Increasing the number of our young people studying STEM is an essential part of the SDLP's job creation and economic growth strategy. We must do more to ensure our young people and, as a consequence our businesses, are equipped with the necessary skills base to excel in this era of global competition.

It is important to get students interested in these subjects at an early age. In government we will work with industry, educationalists and young people themselves to examine ways of increasing uptake of STEM subjects, courses and degrees. This is also crucial in retaining and growing the number of STEM teachers in the future.

The SDLP voted against the 2011-2015 Budget because it cuts the higher education budget and reduces the financial support to our universities.

The SDLP in government would restructure the flawed Budget to ensure adequate long-term support for universities so that students can avail of a wide range of courses, including science and engineering courses.

3. [What will your party do to ensure that excellent researchers from around the world see Northern Ireland's universities as the most attractive place to base their work?]

We are proud of the fact that the North's universities are already powerful knowledge producers, supplying graduates to the local economy, technology transfer and spin-out companies.

As we work to rebuild our local economy, the Northern Ireland Executive must take advantage of the huge potential of our universities to further contribute to economic growth and innovation.

We rejected the Northern Ireland Budget because it cuts universities' ability to continually invest in research facilities.

We want recast the flawed Budget to fund the development of a strategy and action plan to promote our universities to researchers around the world. For example, there is major potential to highlight that Queen's University Belfast is a member of the Russell Group of Top 20 leading research-intensive universities, thanks to its exceptional quality and quantity of research.

The SDLP also supports expansion plans to increase the number of students studying at the Magee campus of the University of Ulster from 3,500 to almost 10,000. This would add an additional £1 billion per year to Derry's economy by 2040, and ensure Magee retains its appeal to researchers on a global scale.

4. [What will your party do to provide an environment that encourages industries based on science and engineering to locate in Northern Ireland, and that encourages higher levels of private-sector investment in research and development?]

The SDLP will work in the next Executive to breathe new life into R&D investment and secure better all-island cooperation to exploit the potential of Framework 7, ahead of 2013.

We will establish an expert team which would quickly identify the R&D opportunities attached to science and engineering, to facilitate researchers and companies in accessing a greater proportion of FP7 funds. We will also argue the case for continued EU programmes in support of R&D post-2013 with our colleagues in the Party of European Socialists, and in the North South Ministerial Council.

The SDLP also proposes creating a virtual 'Open Faculty for Innovation'. This Open Faculty would serve as a platform to engage and encourage not only those studying science and engineering in our universities and our regional colleges, but also those working within science and engineering businesses to work towards achieving a culture that thinks innovation, works innovation and grows innovation.

We must rebalance the North's economy to encourage more private sector investment. We voted against the 2011-2015 Budget because it fails to outline a strategy to achieve this.

While no single action is capable of immediately boosting the private sector, we believe the next Executive must focus on a number of key measures that will make a difference. Our proposals include:

- cutting red tape in government that currently hampers growth, particularly for small companies;
- continue working to make all banks operating in the North keep their lending promises, particularly to small companies;
- lowering corporation tax, in order to attract more multi-national science and engineering powerhouses to Northern Ireland.

DUP respond to CaSE

Below is the response from Peter Robinson, Leader of the DUP, to the CaSE letter to the leaders, 18th April 2011.

1. [What commitments will your party make to ensure that science and engineering advice is at the heart of evidence-based policy making within government? What are your plans for setting out a long-term strategy for science and engineering in Northern Ireland? Will you commit to appointing a dedicated Science Minister and a Chief Scientific Advisor?]

The DUP recognises the crucial need for STEM expertise in growing our economy and ensuring a highly-skilled workforce. The fledgling Assembly has completed a full four-year term. As we develop our political institutions we want to ensure the highest quality evidence-based public policy development, and that we harness expert advice. It is our intention to reduce the number of Government Departments and Ministers rather than creating more but we see no reason why a specific Minister couldn't be directly accountable for science alongside other responsibilities.

2. [How will your party make sure that all children in Northern Ireland have access to a stimulating education in science and mathematics taught by appropriately qualified teachers? How will you sustainably fund science and engineering courses in your universities?]

The DUP will encourage high quality teaching and prioritisation of STEM subjects, at primary, post-primary and university levels. It is important that non-grammars schools are not overlooked. It is crucial at a time of high unemployment levels amongst young people that apprenticeships are developed and businesses are encouraged to participate in vocational training.

3. [What will your party do to ensure that excellent researchers from around the world see Northern Ireland's universities as the most attractive place to base their work?]

We will promote Northern Ireland's reputation for invention and innovation. We will encourage the research output of our universities, with Queen's University a member of the prestigious Russell group. We want our universities over time to be granted greater autonomy so they can attract more private donations. Our manifesto is proposing home loans to encourage STEM graduates to live in Northern Ireland and student loan reliefs for those committing to work in the province for the next decade.

4.[What will your party do to provide an environment that encourages industries based on science and engineering to locate in Northern Ireland, and that encourages higher levels of private-sector investment in research and development?]

We want our businesses and industry to increase innovation and research and development. We want to reduce corporation tax to 10% in Northern Ireland, and will expand knowledge transfer in Northern Ireland.