

Engagement and the election

With a general election looming, *People & Science* asked the science spokespeople for each of the major parties how they see public engagement in science, and what they would hope to achieve in this area if they were to form a government.



For the Conservative Party

Adam Afriye would raise the profile of science

I am optimistic for the future of science. The biggest challenges we face today are largely scientific ones – whether rebalancing the economy, tackling climate change or caring for an ageing population.

Conservatives have set a clear goal: to transform the UK into the leading European high-tech exporter. That will involve a real commitment to raising the profile of the sciences in public life.

Pay off student loans

First, we want to encourage more young people into science and attract more excellent science graduates into teaching. So we plan to pay off the student loans of the top graduates who choose to teach science. Many more young people will enthusiastically study science, technology, engineering and mathematics when they realise the world of opportunities that will be open to them afterwards.

A scientific career is a sexy career. The media have a role to play in communicating that message and I'm delighted that the BBC has

named 2010 as its Year of Science. I'm exploring ways for major broadcasters to create the right image for science. Perhaps a new TV series that shows the cut and thrust of scientists at work might do for science in general what *CSI* did for forensics and what *Spooks* did for MI5.

Lessons in scientific literacy

A second challenge is to support scientific literacy. There have been too many controversies in the past, such as BSE, MMR, and GM. We cannot simply blame the media for scaremongering. Those in positions of responsibility have a duty to communicate quickly and clearly with the public. That's why scientists, religious and political leaders must put forward a strong case, based on evidence presented in a calm and reasonable way, as controversial issues arise. For the sake of our economy and our society we must be clear that evidence matters.

I have been working with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology to deliver a programme of scientific literacy lessons for all new

Conservative MPs after the election. I hope these sessions will also be sought-after by MPs of all political parties.

That brings me to my third point: science in government. The dismissal of Professor Nutt as Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has made it clear that the rules governing the relationship between independent scientific advisers and ministers were inadequate. The government has been forced to consult on a new framework.

Independent scientists are not subject to government whipping, and rightly so. Scientific advisers now need reassurance that they can continue to challenge perceived wisdoms within a clear set of rules. Maintaining confidence in the system of independent scientific advice must be a priority for the current and future science minister.



Adam Afriye MP is the Conservative Party's Minister for Science
afriyeca@parliament.uk

For the Labour Party

Paul Drayson would challenge elitism

For this country to hold its own in a competitive world, we need a highly-skilled scientific workforce: to carry out research, develop new and profitable technologies, and advise government on effective policy making.

This government has made an unprecedented investment in UK science: in education, research facilities and exploiting the potential of UK-led breakthroughs.

This effort has been allied to ensuring we produce further generations of skilled scientists and engineers, backed by an informed and supportive public. As a result we have more students taking STEM degrees. We have more university spin out companies commercialising their scientific research than our European counterparts.

Scientific capability is absolutely crucial for our economic and social wellbeing. Following the global downturn, scientific advances are more important than ever in securing

strong economic growth. They will generate the new technologies necessary to address climate change.

Ambassadors

Labour has endeavoured to reach out to people who have never had the opportunity to appreciate the wonder of science or who have previously felt that it simply wasn't for them. We now have some 19,000 science and engineering ambassadors who go into schools and enthuse young people about the huge range of careers that a science-based education opens up.

Just last year, the Prime Minister launched the 'Science: [So what? So everything]' campaign to challenge elitist images of science and engineering and to show people the benefits they bring. It highlights how science connects to popular interests like sport and cooking, as well as the challenges we all confront, like finding new clean energy sources and beating disease.

We are already seeing results. One of the most popular sections of the 'Science: So What' website has been 'Questions Kids Ask', which answers provocative questions from school children. Providing explanations as to how fish breathe underwater or why we see lightning before we hear thunder has really grabbed young people's attention.

Sense of ownership

Alongside our record investment in science, it is campaigns like these – which highlight our shared stake in science – which will contribute towards a growing sense of public ownership of UK science.

So what of the future? If re-elected we would continue to sponsor campaigns. We would continue to maintain investment in science. We would continue to support the inspirational work of science ambassadors. And by delivering strong economic growth in the years ahead, we would enable more people to not only see but enjoy the benefits of science.



Lord Drayson
is Minister for Science
and Innovation
[http://twitter.com/
LORDDRAYSON](http://twitter.com/LORDDRAYSON)

For the Liberal Democrats

Evan Harris would help everyone engage

There is a perception that science is different from other cultural or intellectual pursuits. Unlike sport, art, or music, it's harder for anyone to 'have a go' at science.

A sense of elitism can form – and Liberal Democrats want to find ways of bridging the 'them and us' divide. Not only do we want to see the brightest from every socio-economic and other social group be able to make careers in science – which is why we would cut the debt burden that deters students from looking at careers in teaching and research – but we want people from all walks of life to be able to engage with science. Science is a public good, just like art and sport.

For instance, during the debates on hybrid embryos, I convened a group which encouraged and organised scientists to talk directly to journalists and not hide behind spokespeople. It worked. As the Science Media Centre has also shown, that is a far better way to engage the public.

Engagement works

On too many occasions the approach by scientists, the science community and even of politicians has been 'best not to comment on that story'. Silence is never the right answer when faced with public controversy, or even journalistic mischief. As the story of our fight back over the animal research lab in Oxford showed, engagement has been shown to work, especially when it's scientists themselves that do it.

So Liberal Democrats are committed to making such engagement more natural for scientists. We want to extend all PhDs to four years, with some of the extra time being used for funded and credited work in teaching and public engagement.

The science community should expect more from their politicians in terms of showing a lead. On the issues of MMR, the Human Tissue Bill, Independent Science Advice and Embryology and a host of other issues the Liberal Democrat front bench has consistently got it right, while the Conservatives have got in the *Daily Mail* and Labour have checked with their focus groups.

Non-scientists too

We also want to make engagement easier for non-scientists. Liberal Democrats would give all students the opportunity to study GCSE Physics, Chemistry and Biology as separate subjects, and have all such students taught by someone with appropriate science training, so that the public becomes more science literate.

We've also made the case for open-access publishing. The evidence shows that it need not (and must not) harm peer review standards. Access by more of the public and the general media to what real science looks like can help them distinguish it from pseudoscience.

The Liberal Democrat vision is one where more and more people engage with science, both in the workplace and out of it.



Dr Evan Harris MP
is the Liberal Democrat
spokesman for science
info@evanharris.org.uk