

# Telling a tale

**Phil Willis** wants MPs to champion science



In 1997, Molly Scott Cato and her colleagues Busby and Bramhall conducted an interesting piece of research: *I don't know much about Science*.<sup>1</sup> Their analysis of the new parliament showed that 30 per cent of MPs did not have an O-level equivalent in any STEM subject, and only 56 had a degree with physics, chemistry, biology or maths. By comparison, 309 MPs (46.8 per cent) had an arts-based degree, including myself with a degree in philosophy! What is more, 80 per cent of MPs worked previously in careers that did not require any significant knowledge of science.

The study has not been repeated, but I suspect that science will be just as under-represented in the 2010 intake. In fact, it is likely to be even less represented. Many of the 'science champions' – Dr Gibson, Dr Iddon, Dr Turner and Doug Naysmith – will be leaving Labour's ranks, whilst Ian Taylor (the former Science Minister) and Tim Boswell (the former HE Minister) will be retiring from the Conservative ranks – as indeed will I from the Liberal Democrats. This will leave precious few MPs willing or able to speak up for science in the tough negotiations ahead of the 2011 Comprehensive Spending Review.

There may of course be new, enthusiastic recruits, but a quick glance down the list of prospective Parliamentary candidates in winnable seats suggests not. It is therefore crucial that the science community raises its standard and gives politicians the clear evidence of the crucial role science must play in our future. There is a fantastic tale to tell – of past successes and a rich future – but someone must tell it with conviction.

## Scientists and politicians

With a backdrop of the huge fiscal deficit, cutbacks in public expenditure and the rise in unemployment, the challenge for the 2010 government will be whether it has the courage and foresight to pursue the nation's long-term future or only short-term goals.

For the science community the answer is simple. From climate change to energy, from food security to global security, the world depends on science for effective solutions. And it is the delivery by science of new technologies to solve these problems that will generate economic growth, so resolving medium- if not short-term problems of unemployment.

But politicians continue to treat science with suspicion and scepticism born of ignorance and a lack of engagement. To be fair, the current Labour government has made significant investments in our science base. The effect has been to repair the damage of past under-investment and, crucially, give the UK a global position in science second only to the USA.

## More cuts

Yet the signs are not good. Despite the 'ring fence' round science budgets, recent announcements from the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) have seen a 52 per cent cut in funding for nuclear physics, 25 per cent reduction in PhD programmes, the withdrawal from ALICE experiments at CERN and the phasing out of a number of space missions including the Cassini probe and the Venus Express orbiter. It seems inevitable that cuts to other areas of science funding will follow. Or does it?

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President Obama has answered these questions for the USA emphatically. Speaking at the National Academies of Sciences (NAS) in Washington in April 2009 he said, 'Science is more essential for our prosperity, our security, our health, our environment and our quality of life than it has ever been before' – and backed that up with a fiscal stimulus package of £480 billion that went directly to research, green technologies, green energy and the scientific skills of young people. Few of our politicians would do this, because most of our politicians see science as peripheral, not central, to today's political challenges.

<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.greenaudit.org/I\\_don't\\_know\\_much\\_about\\_science.htm](http://www.greenaudit.org/I_don't_know_much_about_science.htm)



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## 'Give bees a chance!'

Scientists must run campaigns, asserts  
**Ian Gibson**

When I was approached by an ex-student to help the British Beekeepers' Association in a campaign to research the causes behind the collapse of bee numbers in their hives, I was initially sceptical. After all, there was evidence that the varroa mite, malnutrition and maybe even agrochemicals are involved.

The leadership of the Beekeepers was determined to succeed. I had also spoken at Rothamsted Research Centre and heard how funding for bee research had dried up. I asked myself the question: Why does it always seem that in the UK we close research just when it is most needed? We have found this with BSE and Foot and Mouth just when they became national issues. I joined the campaign.

### Action

We went on to have exchanges with Ministers and government officials. We had discussions with Research Councils and the Wellcome Trust about the research.

We engaged with and received support from the Women's Institute. A book and film were produced as the media picked up on the issues. MPs visited local apiaries with the press in tow. People marched on Downing Street where men and women in white suits, puffing smoke, descended on the police and politicians. Their cry was, 'All we are saying is give bees a chance.'

Meetings were held in both Houses at Westminster and an All Party Group set up. And *The Archers* of BBC Radio 4 fame picked up on the issue and the Beekeepers Association advised on the script!

### Government attitude

I went with the Beekeepers to the House of Lords to speak to a Minister, Lord Rooker. We were told, quite sharply, that there was no money in his department (DEFRA) for this research. This was confirmed by civil servants at other meetings.

Prince Charles took an interest and the government suddenly got the message. Major areas of our economy, for example the fruit industry, depended on bee pollination, and this became a key argument. At international conferences, speakers accentuated the problem was indeed worldwide.

Bees had become the environmental issue of the year. Individuals were encouraged to grow the relevant plants to produce nectar and pollen. People were encouraged to keep bees, even in cities. Courses on beekeeping became fully subscribed and continue to be so to this day.

The government capitulated in the face of this onslaught, and found money for research projects. We followed up by making sure it was real money, ring-fenced and new. We asked for £8 million for research and rumour has it we got more.

Individuals involved in the campaign and the beekeepers' organisation have received many accolades and distinguished awards. This was a successful campaign. It should encourage others to develop their own campaigns and to enable Research Councils to ask for more resources, including peer reviewed research.

### New strategies

Scientists have to form entirely new partnerships to engage with the political process. It is no longer good enough to leave it to vice-chancellors, learned societies, Chief Scientific Advisers or civil servants to deliver the policies of success.

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My experience of policy-formation is that scientists are walked all over by politicians whose tactics and motivation are accurately illustrated by the TV programme, *In the thick of it*. It should be compulsory viewing for every undergraduate and research scientist.

A scientist who has something to offer for the benefit of mankind needs to run a campaign and understand what that means. It will involve many players and should tackle both positive aspects as well as negative. There are many situations where scientists walk away from such activity by saying it's up to the politicians now.

No, it is not!



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