New boy in Parliament

Julian Huppert

It's been quite an experience for me to move from my previous life as a research scientist at the Cavendish Laboratory, University of Cambridge, to becoming an MP. I had thought that if I could understand the intricacies of quantum chemistry, and cope with the Byzantine ways of the University, Colleges and Research Councils, then I would have no problems with adapting to Westminster life.

How wrong I was! It's an altogether bizarre place, with hidden corridors, many levels to all discussions and a strange sense of both urgency and lethargy. Some things can change in the time it takes for a minister to answer an oral question. Others take years of reviews, committees, debates and divisions.

But one thing the House does seem to recognise and value is expertise. This is increasingly a good thing, even as it seems to become rarer in members. In the case of scientists, there are fewer of us as MPs than in the last parliament, or for some time before. If one counts only PhDs, then I believe there are precisely two of us; myself and Dr Thérèse Coffey from Suffolk Coastal. If the net is drawn wider, then there are around 70 names. The Campaign for Science and Engineering has a list at **http://blog.sciencecampaign.org.uk/?p=1451**. There are also non-scientists with an interest in and understanding of science and technology.

However, there are also those who are driven far more by ideology than by science and evidence, and the House is not always good at identifying them quickly, and treating their contributions appropriately.

Science inductions

One scheme which I particularly welcomed was a manifesto commitment from the Conservatives, driven by Adam Afriye, the then Shadow Minister for Science, that all new Conservative MPs would be required to go on a science awareness course. This was a truly excellent idea, and when I saw it I wished we'd thought of it first for our manifesto. Unfortunately, this course ended up being a one-hour seminar, with a division in the middle of David Willetts' (the new Minister for Science and Universities) speech. Only a handful of MPs showed up – around 10. This was very disappointing.

A rather better attended event was the Royal Society for Chemistry's annual Parliamentary Links day, which delivered a crowded room including a number of MPs. This was sadly cut somewhat short by the Budget Statement, which had been brought forward, but was a good showcase for what can be done. However, even then I fear that those MPs who came were largely the usual suspects.

Improving scrutiny

So what can be done to make things better? I think scientists and the various learned societies need to continue to improve their ability to make arguments digestible to those who are ultimately not interested in science, and may even be scared of it. The scientific community needs to be able to support those of us trying to make evidence-based arguments. I'm very fortunate that, through the power of Twitter, I can access many experts who will pull together and analyse information for me.

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And we need better science journalism. I don't mean that there is anything wrong with the existing science journalists. I pay tribute to the likes of Mark Henderson, Pallab Ghosh and Ben Goldacre, but all too often the 'science' stories in papers are written by non-scientists, fitting stories into either the wonder-drug category or the Frankenstein/cancer-killer category, with no room for nuance.

I believe it is essential that evidence forms the basis of all policy decisions, and that scientists and the scientific method have a key role to play in this – but there's work to do!

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