PARTY SPOKESPEOPLE SPEAK OUT ON SCIENCE AHEAD OF ELECTION

A new series of films, “Science Matters”, aims to change the conversation around science ahead of the General Election

Six of the major parties have provided in-depth interviews with their science spokespeople ahead of the General Election next month for an online interview series organised by the British Science Association (BSA).

Representatives from the Conservative Party, Green Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and Scottish National Party (SNP) have taken part in the interviews, hosted by renowned science journalist, Susan Watts, to explain how voters would see a difference if their party were in charge of science after the election.

Science and science policy have often been considered as something conducted in a silo, and not seen as an issue that affects people outside of the scientific profession.

The aim of the BSA’s “Science Matters” series, is to discover what tangible differences the voters might see in their day-to-day lives, depending on which party or parties win/s the election on 7 May.

Rt Hon Greg Clark, Minister for Science, Universities and Cities and the Conservative Party representative in these interviews, admitted that there were differences between the parties’ policies on science, but stressed that he thought we should not be looking to create differences, as science goes beyond any particular Parliament.

Clark explained: “When it comes to the record of my party in government, I think what you’ve seen is science more strongly recognised as being at the heart of policymaking – backed by investment – than ever before.

“And it comes down to this, right across the government from the Prime Minister to the Chancellor to my colleagues in government, the role of science is seen as absolutely essential to the future prosperity of the nation. So investing in science – both in infrastructure and in people – is investing in the future of the country.
“And so in difficult times we’ve managed to protect the investment in science, and more recently we’ve announced an increase in the investment going into science capital for the whole of the next few years but that’s something I want to have a consensus around.”

Green Party spokesperson, Councillor James Abbott, who studied astronomy, repeated his party’s recent promise to double the amount that government spends on research and development, to at least 1% of GDP - a commitment that, so far, no other party has made.

Abbott said: “We are going to need the best scientists with the best technology in order to deal with some of the very serious issues we face as a society globally, so we are absolutely passionate – but also for learning about science and enjoying it in its own right.”

Rt Hon Liam Byrne, Shadow Minister for Universities, Science and Skills said that if the Labour Party were in charge of science after the election, the public could expect to see big changes: “I summarise them [the changes] as people, institutions and money.

“They’ll [the voters] see a university system that is still there after five years, and they’ll see a lower cost for sending young people to university. Secondly, they will see a sensible, decent, real track for technical education, if that’s the way you want to rise to the top of your profession. They’ll also see a much stronger relationship with Europe and that is crucial to our science base.

“And perhaps most important of all, what they won’t see is north of £50billion worth of cuts, which will hit the Department for Business, [Innovation and Skills.] and risks actually destroying the pipeline of talent we’ve got into science, technology and engineering.”

Dr Julian Huppert for the Liberal Democrats, one of the few scientists in Parliament, was keen to see more cross-party work to ensure that science is protected for future generations. “We have to work with the other parties, and so far none of the others have been prepared to sign up to that.”

He also believes that opening up science is the key to giving people more confidence to engage with science. “A lot of people – and I see this in Parliament – are scared of science,” he said. “If you give the public the information, and teach them how to think about it, then you will see citizen science, you’ll see open data, you’ll see people having the tools to look at the data and make up their own minds – that would be really exciting and compelling.”

Hywel Williams spoke for Plaid Cymru and is a former member of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee.

He told us his party is irrevocably green. “We would look for science-based answers to questions about sustainability, production of energy and agriculture.”
His party wants young people to recognise that “the fundamental pursuit of knowledge is a good thing in and of itself”, so that science is seen as more than just a means of improving the economy.

For the Scottish National Party (SNP), Dr Alasdair Allan MSP, said even though Scotland sets much of its own science and education agenda, the debate at Westminster is still relevant because it sets the budget.

Allan said: “We think it will be an interesting election from Scotland’s point of view. We don’t take anything for granted, but I think for the first time in a very long time, Scotland’s 59 MPs may be in a position of some influence. We want to use that influence for the benefit of Scotland but we also want to play a progressive, constructive role in how the UK’s future develops.”

He would put much more effort into exploiting Scotland’s renewable energy potential and into improving the scientific skills shortage.

He said the SNP wants to break down “vocational” and “academic” subjects and to have instead a “curriculum for excellence” – so that someone interested in science doesn’t have to go down what would previously have been regarded as an academic route, with more opportunities in apprenticeships.

Imran Khan, Chief Executive of the British Science Association, said: “For too long science has not featured in the General Election debate, and any discussions that have taken place are between politicians and professional scientists. We want to change that. Science affects everyone in the UK and our series of interviews ask leading politicians to think of the impact their policies have on voters. We hope this series opens up discussions about science policy and its impact on communities across the UK.”

Susan Watts, formerly of BBC Newsnight, conducted the interviews, and said she was pleased to see that there were some differences between the parties on these topics:

“It is possible to spot differences and how these might affect the place of science in our world, and satisfy those of us keen to build a society sufficiently confident to engage with, and to challenge, the world of science.

“If pressed, there is much to learn from the political parties about the impact they might have at the election on the place of science in our nation. It remains only for some far-sighted soul to make science a prominent campaign issue, as the driver of advances in health and education, as well as the economy.”

All six of the full interviews with the parties’ science spokespeople are available on the British Science Association’s YouTube channel.

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Notes to editors:

All of the Science Matters films are available on the British Science Association Youtube Channel.

The full interviews are available on YouTube, as well as a shorter film for each party.

The interviews that were conducted are as follows:

- Rt Hon Greg Clark (Conservative Party), Minister for Science, Universities & Cities: https://youtu.be/O_Qqo4W9j2c
- Councillor James Abbott (Green Party), Spokesperson on Science and Technology: https://youtu.be/5phTuRvQag4
- Rt Hon Liam Byrne (Labour Party), Shadow Minister for Universities, Science & Skills: https://youtu.be/Pbz3SZow_mI
- Dr Julian Huppert (Liberal Democrats), Science spokesperson: https://youtu.be/WxjlAUvbGKk
- Hywel Williams (Plaid Cymru), Member of the Science and Technology Committee (2012-2014): https://youtu.be/rUffGpwXZkQ
- Dr Alasdair Allan MSP (Scottish National Party), Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages: https://youtu.be/BLmw2wxo9fQ

The UK Independence Party were invited to take part in an interview on several occasions but unfortunately were not able to accept the invitation due to scheduling issues.

About the British Science Association

The British Science Association (BSA) believes that science should be part of – rather than set apart from – society and culture, and owned by the wider community. Our programmes encourage people of all ages and backgrounds to engage with science, become ambassadors for science, and ultimately to be empowered to challenge and influence British science- whether they work in science or not.

Established in 1831, the BSA is a registered charity that organizes major initiatives across the UK including British Science Week, the British Science Festival, regional and local events, the CREST Awards and other programmes for young people in schools and colleges. The BSA organises specific activities for professional science communicators, including a specialist conference and training.

For more information, please visit: www.britishscienceassociation.org