

Alliance for Science

TUC Seminar, with Lord Paul Drayson Science Minister,
Chair Frances O'Grady, TUC Deputy General Secretary

18 February 2009
London

This seminar is the start of a series of seminars to consider the way forward for science putting the trade unions priorities forward. In attendance were representatives of TUC, UCU, Unite, ATL, Prospect and GMB.

Frances O'Grady set the TUC's agenda: lead for science in the emerging green area, e.g. hybrid vehicles. Drive to develop high quality Jobs. Reward and gender balance in the sector. The TUC has identified 31 sectors that accelerate in growth. Why has the UK got a problem at translating research to manufacture.

Paul Drayson outlined his background: having completed a SERC funded PhD in robotics then working in the car, food and latterly biotech industries. He started his own businesses during periods of economic down turn thus has first hand experience of the pressures. He claimed to understand the vital need for science in a time of economic down turn. He believes that under the current labour government science has undergone a renaissance. He is a supporter the need for commercialisation in the research work conducted in universities. The UK has benefited from a growth in GDP of recent. He sees there is now a need to focus on Science and high tech' manufacturing; which past governments have not done. He questioned whether our science base was balanced to support industries. He noted that the US has, of recent, doubled its science budget. Within the UK there is need of a debate as to what we are good at and what we can excel at in the next ten years: Should we spend more; should we focus?

He flagged the NHS as having a relatively untapped database which could be used to guide focus. He identified that the 10 % reduction of energy within the UK would require a huge investment and that industry did not have the driving force to provide this. He identified three main areas in this sector:

- Fusion
- Tidal power, (a high potential in the UK)
- Off shore wind power

As such he identified three focus areas: Clean Briton, Digital Briton, Healthy Briton. Paul highlighted the inaccessibility of science to the public; the perception is science is carried out by an elite. He raised the importance to have a scientifically literate population; and as such the launch of publicity to appeal to the reality TV population. He highlighted the need for scientists to communicate and be accountable.

There is a need to develop a plan during this year and that the trade union movement has a key role in this. He proposed a "Scientific Summit". The time is now to push.

In response to questions / observations on the non joined up approaches to large programmes (Seven barriers, high speed train contracts to lost to Japan and win turbine construction to Portugal. Drayson stated we should not put up with this frustration; politicians have not all woken up to the fact we should be inwardly investing.

Comments that there was a lack of science knowledge in the government and that there was a need for consistent funding to bring science to the market (such as the drop the research councils budget). Where acknowledged.

It was highlighted that agricultural research expertise around GM (genetic modification) was being thwarted by too much red tape in the EU, and that there was a need to improve image. Paul acknowledged there was a need to learn from the past in this area and there was a need for changes.

It was observed that there were issues with bureaucracy which hindered collaborative work with other workers in other countries. Also those start up companies use a lot of capital to get started. Paul noted that whilst venture capital was now at a low, past venture capital enterprises are flourishing. He noted trends to shut "expert" labs and that these were lost resources; where they might be spun out or spun into a university environment. Paul noted there were local council problems with placing high-tech manufacturing facilities near the core research facilities as not all councils favoured these plant. He felt that civil servants should not do this.

In response to how can we promote science to the youth Paul said media was an issue in that this was the first down turn with 24/7 reporting and it was driving down the expectations of youth. We need heroes (people in their 20s and 30s) he cited the team behind Lewis Hamilton. It was also suggested a return of "Tomorrows World" would be welcome.

Paul welcomed the suggestion that he receive notice of university science departments under threat and that VC should be considering there role within their communities.

In conclusion it was highlighted that action was needed this year in formulating a plan. It was stated that the treasury should be looking forward and modelling GDP and pressure need to be bought to bear.