

Voice of the Future 2013

James Lush

Young researchers speak with a common voice as key questions about women in science and early career researchers go unanswered by MPs.

On 20 March, the Biochemical Society sent six young members to take part in Voice of the Future (VOF 2013), organized for the second time¹ by the Society of Biology. Representatives of a number of learned societies² posed questions to a variety of MPs and advisors (see Box) in a whirlwind morning which preceded the budget. Fortunately, our event was the much more civilized of the two, with deputy speaker Lindsay Hoyle MP having to chastise the House for making the chamber a ‘circus’ at the latter.

The Speaker of the House of Commons, Rt Hon John Bercow MP, introduced the event. The event was designed as a ‘reverse evidence session’ with the young scientists (aged between 16 and 35) taking the seats usually filled by the Select Committee around the ‘horseshoe’.

You can watch the event in full at the UK Parliament website³.

A controversial Select Committee member

Many eyebrows were raised when David Tredinnick MP, who is well known for calling for research into how homoeopathy ‘works’, recently joined the Select Committee. However, perhaps to the disappointment of some, his answers at VOF 2013 did not provide much of an opportunity for the opponents of his presence to attack him. With eight members of the committee in attendance for a 45 minute session, he had little opportunity to speak at length. When he did, he first responded to a question on the UK’s EU



Members of the Select Committee

“Voice of the Future was a great opportunity to see how scientists interact with government and I’m glad to have taken part. I took away the idea that scientists can make a big impact on policy and the event has really changed my thinking about future career options”

Simon Lloyd, John Innes Centre

membership by saying that we need as much collaboration in science as possible and it is therefore important that we keep up our relationship (a view later echoed by David Willetts MP). He subsequently answered a question on the ethical issues of cloning by agreeing with Sarah Newton MP and highlighting that public attitudes evolve, citing gay marriage as an example. He did at one point say that we must also look to the past as well as the future for wisdom, citing the potential value of herbalism. However, although this is often associated with complementary and alternative medicine, his point can be robustly argued as scientifically legitimate, as many pharmaceuticals have their origins in extracting and modifying compounds from plants.

In science as in politics?

With each panel questioned under the watchful eye of Baroness Boothroyd from her portrait (after whom the room in which the event took place is named, and who served as the first and only female Speaker of the House of Commons to date), women in science was a key theme throughout the event.

What became clear is that mainstream political discourse on women in science remains primarily focused on the school level: attracting girls into science in the first place by gender-neutralizing it and providing female role models. This remains important, but, although efforts have previously been made to widen the debate⁴, the issue is considerably broader than where the discussion remains. This is especially seen in the biosciences, where there are roughly equal numbers of women and men at the PhD career stage. Beyond this, David Willetts was very keen to emphasize that moving into careers associated with science should not be seen as ‘leaving’ science. Shabana Mahmood MP went on to emphasize the value of PhD-level skills outside of academia. Again, these are valid points, but it was noticeable that there was a lack of convincing discourse on researchers, especially early-career researchers (of both sexes) who do want to stay

“Voice of the Future is a key route for young scientists to make their voices heard as well as become informed on current and emerging thinking in science policy.”

Christopher Pudney, University of Bath

in active research. David Willetts essentially said that he is happy with the postdoctoral research system – stating that it is very lively and hinting that the stability of other countries’ systems is offset by the freedom and dynamism associated with opportunities in the UK – and would be for the research councils to decide on how any problems can be addressed. This – as our representative Christopher Pudney noted to me after the event – is an important point, as it means that people thinking about these problems need to direct their energies towards research councils and not government.

Although it is difficult to draw direct comparisons due to the relatively tiny number of MPs compared with scientists – and the many different types of scientist – Shabana Mahmood suggested that gender diversity is in a much worse state in Parliament. Shabana, who spoke at the launch of our Women in Biochemistry 2013 celebrations⁵, explained how she benefitted from the strongest possible form of positive discrimination: an all-women shortlist (AWS). She explained that Labour had made this legal⁶ because of the “catastrophically low numbers of women in politics”, and said that it has made a difference to politics as a last resort. However, she said that in science “we haven’t tried everything else yet”.

Best of the rest

Elsewhere in the proceedings, we heard Sir John Beddington talk about his key achievements as Government Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA), including the installation of a departmental CSA in every government department, and his raising the profile of key issues such as the ‘perfect storm’ facing the world: issues surrounding food and water supplies, energy and the climate being critically interlinked⁷. To these he added poverty and antimicrobial resistance as the key global challenges.

We also talked a little about entrepreneurship, with Andrew Miller saying that academics should look around them locally for new collaborations, thereby providing



The young scientists and engineers take their seats at the horseshoe to question the witnesses

opportunities for innovation. This reflects the broader renewed interest in clustering and co-location in the research system, despite science now being a truly global enterprise. For example, at a speech given two weeks earlier for the think tank Politeia, Professor Sir Greg Winter said that his contribution to the ‘Bridging the Valley of Death’ inquiry⁸ would be to recommend (among other things) a model based on personal contacts with in a culture of local enterprise and industry.

If you’re a young researcher and would like to get involved in science policy, do get in touch with the Society. You might even get the chance to come to next year’s event! Thanks again to those who represented us on the day: Doriana Cellura (University of Southampton), Simon Lloyd (John Innes Centre), Jennifer Postles (Rothamsted Research), Christopher Pudney (University of Bath), Oliver Summers (University of Greenwich) and Justyna Zaborowska (University of Oxford). ■

James Lush was the Policy Manager at the time of the event. He now works for the Equality Challenge Unit as a member of the Athena SWAN Charter team, which is part-funded by the Biochemical Society and aims to advance the representation of women in science, engineering and technology.

References

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