

Voice of the Future 2014

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The tables were turned in Parliament, as young scientists were provided the chance to grill MPs on hot-button science issues.

Voice of the Future, organized by the Society of Biology and now in its third year, saw 100 young representatives from 22 learned societies and institutions quiz key political figures in March. Among those facing Select Committee-style questioning were the Government Chief Scientific Advisor, Sir Mark Walport, and members of the Science and Technology Select Committee.

And proving the widespread role of science, the session took a few controversial turns as issues such as nuclear power, immigration, badger culls and Scottish independence were debated.

It was up to Biochemical Society representative Michael Carter to open the questioning, asking Sir Mark whether the Government was doing enough to promote the public understanding of science.

Sir Mark said the focus should be not on understanding, but engagement. “You talk about public understanding of science, but it’s equally important that scientists understand the public,” he said. “It’s about a two-way conversation between the scientific community and all the publics, of which you are one. We have to talk to each other and not at each other.”

He later added that scientists needed to recognize the realities of politics, saying politicians had to make decisions quickly and often when evidence was incomplete or unavailable.

Minister for Universities and Science David Willetts defended the Government’s immigration policy, following a question on the negative impact it could be having on science and engineering.

The immigration changes were to ensure foreign students had enough English language skills, so as to not slow down classroom discussions and disadvantage other students, Willetts said. “We’ve tightened the criteria, but we have not introduced a cap on numbers and we’re not going to introduce a cap on numbers.”

Willetts also stood up for the Government’s push to see research projects deliver direct economic benefits.



Young scientists quizzed politicians and officials at Voice of the Future, 19 March

There was “no policy to shift support away from the fundamental sciences”, he said, rather the Government was “inviting scientists and researchers to think about the wider implications of what they do.”

Willetts pointed to the Square Kilometre Array which, while it’s own curiosity-driven project, would “drive advances in computers and software”.

Liam Byrne, the Shadow Minister for Universities, Science and Skills, pledged his personal support for government-backed student loans for postgraduate education, although he stopped short of a party commitment. “All the evidence and all the arguments point to the virtue of getting this done and getting it done fast.”

Byrne warned that Scottish independence would be “nothing short of catastrophic” for Scottish scientists and institutions. He said Scotland would lose access to both British and European funding and the time taken to renegotiate EU membership would have major knock-on effects. ■

Voice of the Future was organized by the Society of Biology and supported by the Biochemical Society. A full video of the session is available on the Parliament website at <http://bit.ly/1noRsQA>.