

Science and the new government

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The outcome of the election on May 7 was no doubt a surprise to many. Of all the results predicted, suggested and discussed at length, a Conservative majority was not a front-runner. The close race predicted by most opinion polls just didn't pan out.

So, instead of a period of governmental uncertainty, what followed was a period of resignations and hating followed by the swift establishment of the first all-Conservative cabinet in 18 years. Not to mention a trip to Westminster for a group of 56 Scottish National party MPs.

Regardless of your political inclinations, the establishment of a new Government is an interesting time. Who will get which brief in the Cabinet? Who won't feature? Which allegiances will be revealed? If, like me, you're a bit of a policy geek, you no doubt spent days with BBC news on refresh, furtively checking twitter (let's hope my line manager isn't reading this...).

However, for us in the science community there's one key consideration behind all of this; how will science fare?

Clearly, the assignment of the science brief within Government is important. Many have felt this has become somewhat diluted of late, with the former Science Minister Greg Clark MP having "Cities" tacked on to his job title. There was some relief therefore when Jo Johnson MP, brother of a certain Boris, was appointed Minister for Universities and Science. However George Freeman's previous post of Life Sciences Minister seems to have all but disappeared.

Although Johnson is a relative unknown to the science community, and a newcomer to science and higher education policy himself, initial reaction to his appointment was favourable. Before being given the role, he headed up the No.10 Policy Unit and was expected to get to grips with the big issues facing the science community fairly readily, much like David Willetts did back in 2010.

Johnson is considered to be supportive of the European Union, which has become an increasingly important source of funding for UK-based scientists, and has openly called for students to be removed from the net migration target. Indeed he has spoken out on the importance of allowing students to come to the UK. In a recent article in the *Financial Times*, he wrote: "Britain's universities are a globally competitive export sector and well-placed to make a greater contribution to growth. With economic growth at a premium, the UK should be wary of artificially hobbling it."

A key means that science is represented within Parliament is the Science and Technology Select Committee. At the time of writing, the Committee was



not yet re-established but was fully expected to be so. With the retirement of its former Chair, Andrew Miller MP, and the loss of several key MPs from across the parties who were crucial advocates for science, the new Committee presents a fresh raft of MPs with which the science community can engage. We will need to work even harder to ensure that new parliamentarians understand the critical role science and technology has to play in delivering growth, enhancing and protecting the environment and supporting the policy making process.

Looking ahead, the next key announcement will be the Spending Review. Over the summer the Government is expected to conduct a thorough analysis, predicted to cover the full term of the new Parliament up to 2020. This will determine departmental R&D budgets as well as how much money the Government will invest in science and engineering. A lot of tough decisions will likely be made and deep cuts felt as a result.

Compared to other budgets, the science budget has fared comparatively well in recent years, having been ring-fenced since 2010. This is perhaps due to George Osborne's identification of science as a 'personal priority'. However, in real terms the ring-fence presents a gradual eroding of funding due to inflation. When compared internationally, UK R&D investment is falling behind. In 2012, the UK's gross expenditure on R&D was 1.7% of GDP, well below the EU 28 and OECD averages. France, which has a similar sized economy to the UK, outstrips our research investment by nearly 40%. In order for science to flourish, and for the economy to benefit as a result, there needs to be a real commitment from the Government, rather than merely paying lip service to the importance of science.

Time will tell how science will fare in the new Government. Engaging with the new Science and Technology Select Committee and the new Minister for Universities and Science as well as campaigning for science in the run up to the spending review will be vital. The Biochemical Society will be working with the Society of Biology and the Campaign for Science and Engineering to this end. ■

For more information or to get involved with our policy work, please contact policy@biochemistry.org

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