The Foundation for Science and Technology meeting to celebrate Sir David King's tenure as Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government

27th November, 2007

The Rt Hon John Denham MP
Secretary of State
Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)

Speaking notes

- Very pleased to say a few words at Sir David's valedictory lecture and dinner

- DIUS new department, my role is new

- but in developing our new department will draw heavily on Sir David's work

- in GO Science

- across Whitehall.

- distinguished career of course

- but not uncontroversial

- from early years in South Africa where his reaction to apartheid effectively forced him to pursue his career abroad
- to his attempts to win the hearts of, at various times, organic farmers, the anti-nuclear movement, and, of course, badger lovers everywhere

- those of us who have worked with him – in my case originally when supporting his case for the Home Office to have a chief scientist: a strategy he pursued so that nine senior scientists are now employed in many government departments – however, appreciate advice which is clear, forthright; and because of that, above all useful to public policy makers.

- it is not difficult to be forthright and controversial; but much harder to get any one to listen; but no surprise that he has been named in different publications as one of the 100 most influential men.

- will say a little more about that in a moment.

- But looking at my new department, Sir David's legacy could not be more clear.

- The greatly expanded and ring-fenced science budgets, championed, of course, with David Sainsbury.

- The Energy Technologies Institute

- The Global Science and Innovation Forum which aims to make the UK the partner of choice for global business looking to locate r and d activities, and for foreign university collaboration

- the Council for Science and Technology, with whom I was recently discussing the technologies most readily exploitable within the next five years, and who did ground-breaking work on nanotechnology and its implications

- and in leading the developing of the G8 science Carnegie group – aiming to bring science to bear on international public policy as he has domestically

- and above all, of course, my department, like the rest of Government will forever be shaped by David's success in putting climate on the political agenda here and abroad.

- It is nearly 50 years since CP Snow wrote of the two culture – the scientific and the non-scientific; and its implications for decision-making in a modern society.

- If in recent years we have made some progress in breaking out of those cultures, Sir David's insistence on the importance of the scientific understanding of public policy issues has been crucially important.

- There is, sometime, confusion about the role of science in public policy. Some people, including some ministers perhaps, fear that this means devolving public policy to scientists; rendering the democratic (or bureaucratic process) irrelevant as you hand everything to a committee of experts.

- But of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Science does not mean we can do without politics or democracy. It does not remove the choices we must make about what issues to tackle, or which selections to make of the available policy tools.

- It simply enables us to understand properly what those issues are; it forces us sometimes to confront issues we would rather not think about (and which have not yet found their way into constituents e-mails); and it enables us to understand the difference between real choices, and those that could not work.

Throughout his career, and most recently as CSA, Sir David has worked tirelessly to get us to understand the role of science. There is a way to go; but he has done a job for which we should all be grateful.