

CHRISTMAS RECEPTION

Held at The Royal Society on 9th December, 2009

The Foundation is grateful for the support for this meeting from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, EngineeringUK and the Natural Environment Research Council.

- Chair:** **The Earl of Selborne KBE FRS**
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology
- Speaker:** **David Willetts MP**
MP for Havant and Shadow Minister for Universities and Skills
- Respondents:** **Professor Alan Thorpe**
Chair, RCUK Executive Group and Chief Executive, Natural Environment Research Council
Sir Anthony Cleaver
Chairman, EngineeringUK
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MR WILLETTS outlined the Conservative Party's perspective on science. He said that there were many shared priorities and attitudes between the present government and his party. They both believed in the importance of research and science and he strongly endorsed the initiatives and drive that Lord Sainsbury had introduced. He also endorsed the emphasis on dealing with global problems such as climate change and poverty. He was particularly concerned about demographic changes, and the divergence between aging and young populations. He also shared the view that the Haldane principles on funding for research should be followed, and the dual structure for funding maintained. He had doubts however about some features of the new REF (Research Excellence Framework), in particular the factor for impact. How was this to be measured? Would, for example, the "research" that led to the MMR debacle be rewarded for impact? He was also concerned that industrial policy and scientific research funding should be closely linked. It was not evident that there was a linear process where scientific research went in at one end and commercial success came out from the other. Moreover it was dangerous to formalize too rigidly the relationships between universities and business. Universities should beware of spinning off companies too soon. He was particularly concerned to breakdown barriers between research and commercial success. Areas which could be explored were tax credits, delays in getting IP because of peer review, the legal framework on patents and institutional overlap with differing standards. He attached particular importance to effective clustering of businesses and institutions. On education generally, he shared the government's emphasis on getting more students doing Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, getting more scientists into teaching and giving pupils better career advice.

James Dyson was reviewing these issues for the Conservative Party.

PROFESSOR THORPE, in responding, welcomed Mr. Willett's support for continued investment in research. The UK was a centre of excellence and we needed to celebrate this and make clear the impact that good research has on social and economic problems. But there is a long time gap between research and final impact, and that is why we need a sustained pattern of funding. We need to measure impact both quantitatively and qualitatively and consider it from the start. The Research Councils have strong links to business and internationally. Research was crucial for a sustainable world and national economy and a successful society.

SIR ANTHONY CLEAVER also welcomed Mr. Willett's comments, and was glad to learn of the consensus across the political divide. He wished to emphasize the importance of collaboration between businesses, universities and the Government. He endorsed Mr. Willett's comments on clustering. This was particularly important in addressing the likely shortfall of engineers at technician level as well as at higher levels (he noted the demographic decline in 18 to 24 year olds). We badly needed these technicians, and they were more likely to come from areas where there was a cluster of manufacturing or engineering companies, including many SMEs and a tradition of engineering. Of course, getting more pupils to do STEM subjects was vital, but they should be seen as a way of encouraging apprenticeships as well as university entries. He hoped the engineering diploma, which 6,000 pupils were studying for, would be continued.

Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield KCB

[see next page for links]

Useful web links:

Arts and Humanities Research Council
www.ahrc.ac.uk

Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research
Council
www.bbsrc.ac.uk

David Willetts MP
www.davidwilletts.org.uk

Economic and Social Research Council
www.esrc.ac.uk

Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
www.epsrc.ac.uk

EngineeringUK
www.engineeringuk.com

The Foundation for Science and Technology
www.foundation.org.uk

Medical Research Council
www.mrc.ac.uk

Natural Environment Research Council
www.nerc.ac.uk

The Royal Academy of Engineering
www.raeng.org.uk

Science and Technology Facilities Council
www.scitech.ac.uk

Technology Strategy Board
www.innovateuk.org

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