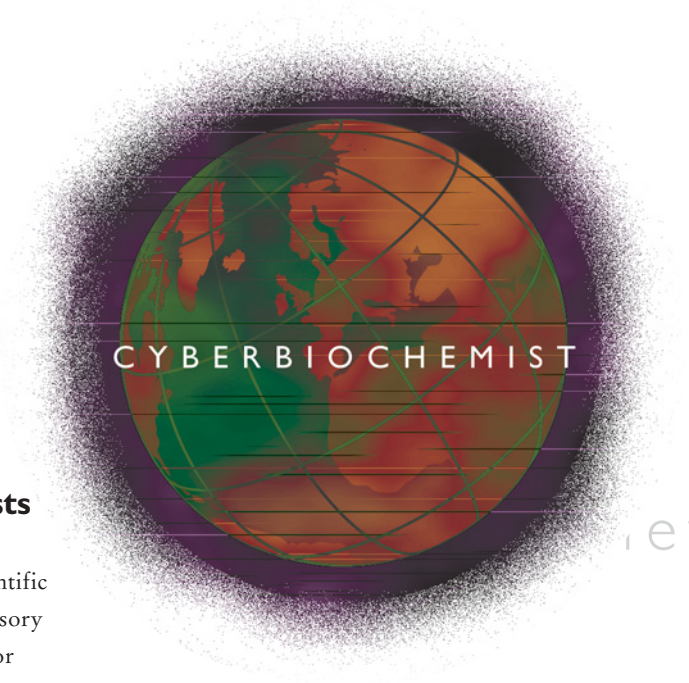
# Campaign trail




by Carolyn Moores
(BBSRC David Phillips Fellow, Birkbeck College, London, UK)

An electron is on the way and whatever your political (dis)inclinations, there are questions to be asked about how strongly, or even whether, science will feature in the coming political debate.

## Scientists as constituents

What are the current government's SET (science, engineering and technology) policies, and what stance do the other political parties take towards SET, its role and promotion? This information can be accessed via the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry, www.dti.gov.uk) and the Labour party (www.labour.org.uk) websites. Within the DTI (where the Secretary of State is Patricia Hewitt), the Office of Science and Technology website (www.ost.gov.uk) lays out the policies of the past and the plans for the future. From the Conservative party website (www.conservatives.com), it is not obvious who speaks on Science and Technology, but Google reveals that the Conservative Shadow Trade and Industry Minister is Robert Key (www.robertkey.com/dti.htm). Malcolm Bruce is the Shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for the Liberal Democrats (www.libdems.org.uk, www.malcolmbruce.libdems.org.uk. For a record of actual statements and comments on SET issues in Parliament, track the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee (www.pandsctte.demon.co.uk/) and check out the Hansard website for 'the edited verbatim report of proceedings in both Houses' (www.parliament.uk/hansard/hansard.cfm), or the more accessible digest of this at www.theyworkforyou.com, which also helps you to find your own MP.

## Scientists as lobbyists

The government receives scientific advice from independent advisory boards, but who else speaks for science and scientists in the political arena? Save British Science (www.savebritishscience.org.uk) lobbies government on behalf of the scientific community, seeks to highlight the central role of SET in many aspects of British life and monitors the health of British science.

In general in the UK, professional societies, such as The Biochemical Society (www.biochemistry.org/), focus their energies on the organization and promotion of scientific activities of their members and play a role in the communication of these activities to the public. Many other groups are also actively and innovatively involved in educating the general public [UK Network of Science Centres and Museums (www.ecsite-uk.net/index.php) and The British Association for the Advancement of Science (www.the-ba.net/the-ba/)]. This is in contrast with the US, where professional bodies, such as the American Society for Cell Biology (www.ascb.org/publicpolicy/) and the American Chemical Society (www.chemistry.org/portal/a/c/s/1/policymakers.html), focus an equal portion of their outreach effort on educating and lobbying members of both Houses of Congress and their staffs, with the goal of influencing policy.

Politicians are pulled in many directions in attempting to gauge the issues that are important for the electorate. SET specifically does not make it into the top 20 of these priorities, yet it seems obvious that health, education and the environment, to name just a few high priority areas, have everything to do with science and technology. If the public, and presumably their elected representatives, do not see the role of SET in these areas, why would they care about the woes of the research community?

## Scientists as communicators

The role of Save British Science and other organizations is to communicate the central place that science plays in everyday matters. But if we believe that SET is an integral part of the electorate's major concerns, then is it not also incumbent on individual scientists to communicate their interests to a wider audience? To get the public engaged in understanding and supporting science, scientists must become engaged in public dialogue. The relationship between the public and science has been a topic of increased scrutiny and has a lot to do

with perception and image. Surveys suggest that a big part of why the public has such unrealistic expectations of scientists (www.mori.com/polls/2002/science.shtml) is that we tend to be wary of participating in public debate[1].

Until recently, science communication has not been part of a research scientist's professional activities or training, but that is changing. The Science Media Centre (www.sciencemediacentre.org) was set up to answer the need of news organizations and, indirectly, the public for informed scientific opinion and debate. In addition, several of the UK research councils run media communication courses (www.bbsrc.ac.uk/support/communicate/Welcome.html; www.epsrc.ac.uk/PublicEngagement/default.htm), while the Royal Society organizes an MP-science partnership scheme to foster relationships and nurture dialogue between those who control legislation and those whose work influences the legislative context. You could begin yourself by telling your friends and family why you are passionate about your work. A colleague of mine ambushes fellow passengers on planes and reports a generally enthusiastic reception. Every explanation you can provide to an inquisitive non-scientist makes an important contribution to the dialogue between science and society.

Of course, with the upcoming election, the most important contribution any of us can make to the political process is to show up and vote.

## References

1. Augenbraun, E. (2005) Nature (London) **433**, 357–358

**Carolyn Moores**
**c.moores@mail.cryst.bbk.ac.uk**