

Campaign trail

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

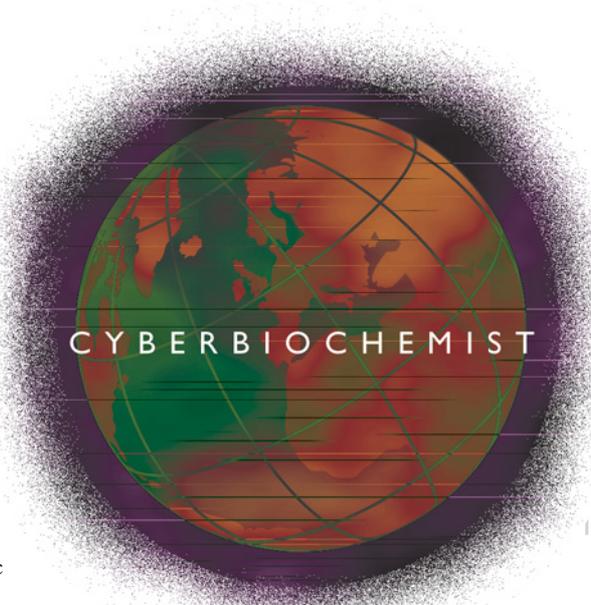
What are the current government's SET (science, engineering and technology) policies, and what stance do the other political parties take towards SET, its role and promotion? This information can be accessed via the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry, www.dti.gov.uk) and the Labour party (www.labour.org.uk) 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.malcolmbuce.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

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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 debate¹.

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

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Best of the Web

It is now widely accepted that global warming is affecting, and will continue to affect, our climate. The focus now is on just how large the climatic change will be, and scientists at Oxford and other UK universities, together with the Met Office, are conducting a huge experiment that relies on the general public to help model our future climate. The project is funded by the National Environment Research Council, and uses home computers' idle time to run a model based on the General Circulation Model used by the Met Office for weather forecasts. This website is a platform for downloading and installing the software to run the model, and includes discussion pages and information about climate change and the ways models can be used. Once installed, it can be set to run in the background or in idle time.

The simulation takes into account as many variables as possible, comparing results with past climatic change in order to assess the accuracy of the model. There are three stages to the experiment: the first, launched in 2003, aims to identify the parameters that will be used by the model. The stable models will then simulate past climate change. Those that represent the past accurately are then used in the final stage, to predict future climates. By running the model in a distributed way, over 4 million simulations have been carried out, far more than would be capable by present supercomputers, increasing scientists' confidence in the results.

Since SETI@home was launched in 1999, it seems there are scientists out there clamouring for our CPU time. The latest scheme, Einstein@home, will use the distributed computer system to detect gravity wave-emitting compact stars. These projects involve the general public, inspire children and raise public awareness. Recent predictions from the climate prediction experiment, that global temperature could eventually rise by up to 11°C, prove that distributed models can also provide new and important results.

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