



Westminster Bridge

by **Mark Burgess**
(Executive Editor)

Established by the Royal Society in 2001, the MP–Scientist Pairing Scheme aims to build bridges between some of the best research workers in the country and members of the UK Parliament. To date, over 100 scientists and MPs have taken part. The scheme comprises three activities: a briefing by the Royal Society, a Week in Westminster, and reciprocal visits to the constituency office and the laboratory.

Anne Begg MP and Anne Donaldson, a member of the Biochemical Society, form one of the pairs.

Anne Begg was elected Labour MP for Aberdeen South on May 1st 1997. She has a degree in history and politics from Aberdeen University and began teaching English and history in 1978 in Kirriemuir. She moved on to become Principal Teacher of English at Arbroath Academy, the post she relinquished (with some reluctance) on her election to Parliament.

Anne Donaldson comes from Glasgow and studied natural sciences at the University of Cambridge. After graduating in 1989 she did her PhD research at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology. She then did postdoctoral work at the University of Washington in Seattle, where she began to work on DNA replication. After a period in Dundee, Anne

moved her laboratory to the Institute of Medical Sciences at the University of Aberdeen in summer 2003.

Members of the Donaldson lab continue to investigate the controls over DNA replication and chromosome organization in yeast.

Q. Why did you decide to take part in the scheme?

A.B. One of my constituents had been paired with a neighbouring colleague a couple of years ago and so I had heard of the scheme and thought it was an interesting idea. The more people who know about and understand the workings of Parliament, the better for democracy.

A.D. I was interested to see how Parliament works and what the life of an MP is like. Also it was a great opportunity to understand how science policy is developed

at the level of government and parliament.

Q. What made you take up politics?

A.B. I wanted to make the world a better place, to end poverty and give all people the opportunity to achieve their full potential in life.

Q. What made you take up science?

A.D. I think I was born a scientist. As a child I pestered my parents with constant questions about what was around me.

Q. The basic salary of an MP is £59 095; that of a senior lecturer is about £39 000.

Do you think these levels reflect their respective contributions to Society?

A.B. I don't know how society values some of the things I have done as an MP either collectively or as an individual. My vote on the Pension Credit bill helped lift 1.9 million pensioners out of poverty; my participation in the committee stage of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act has made it possible for all



Anne Donaldson (left) and
Anne Begg MP



disabled people to have equal access to education; my speech on the need for research using embryonic stem cells persuaded a number of MPs to vote to change the regulations. These are just a few of the things that I have been involved in over the past 8 years. As a teacher, I earned half of what I do as an MP, but now work twice as many hours and help up to 1000 individual constituents each year. They judged me at the last election by re-electing me.

A.D. What a question! As with any creative job, many MPs and scientists work incredibly hard and contribute far more than might be expected given their salaries, while some contribute less. It's generally acknowledged that academics (in common with others in education) are not well paid compared with other professions requiring similarly high qualifications and long training periods.

Q. Science is regarded as dispassionate and evidence-based. Politics is regarded as far more passionate and based on appeals to emotions. How true is this?

A.B. Politics is only successful in delivering real change on the ground if it is evidence-based. Otherwise we can legislate all we like based on emotions but it won't improve people's lives if it doesn't work.

A.D. Only non-scientists could regard science as dispassionate. Scientific enquiry is as full of creativity, success, drama, excitement, frustration and disappointment as any other field of human endeavour — perhaps more so.

Q. Are politicians not trusted as

much as they should be, and scientists trusted more than they deserve?

A.B. I'm not sure that scientists enjoy the level of trust they once did, as evidenced by the debate around MMR, BSE, GM and food safety and genetics. Some sections of society automatically disbelieve anything said by the government or established scientists but believe every crackpot idea they read on the web.

A.D. Perhaps the public puts too much faith in statements that are labelled 'scientific'. Scientists almost never seek to mislead, but there's a problem with public perception of scientific 'fact'. Science is just investigation according to formalized logic and common sense, and there's a degree of uncertainty in any scientific conclusion. It's when scientific results are presented as conclusive and unchallengeable that problems arise.

As for politicians, I think that the vast majority act from the best motives and usually stick to them. But there's more room for opinion and argument in politics, and no absolute truth, and the pressures of public opinion, for sure, can affect how politicians present issues.

Q. Do they have an equal enemy in the media?

A.B. Yes

A.D. I think the media are largely responsible for giving the false impression that science equates to certainty.

Q. What does the BSE crisis teach about scientists and politicians? Do the foot-and-mouth crisis and the MMR scare form part of the same continuum?

A.B. As I said a bit earlier, it has led to scientists not enjoying the level of trust they once did.

A.D. BSE and MMR are examples of the problems that arise when politicians or the media present science findings as fact rather than likelihood and, moreover, fail to communicate where the weight of expert opinion lies.

Q. What is the main problem facing British science? What can be done about it?

A.B. It needs to be valued more highly for what it can contribute to improving the human condition.

A.D. Within universities, there's serious tension between the requirement to teach and the demand to do excellent research; the tough international competition in most scientific fields means few academics can really manage both, at least the way labs currently operate.

For large numbers of postdoctorates and fellows on short-term contracts, career structure is a very serious issue.

Q. Will you still be in your job in 4 years' time?

A.B. That is entirely up to the electorate. I have a very marginal seat and if the British people decide they don't want a Labour government then I will lose my seat regardless of how well I have done my job.

A.D. Since 2003 I've had a permanent contract. The opportunity to work in different places can be exciting and rewarding — but the constant 'what next?' worry and enforced mobility due to the uncertainty of short-term contracts are a miserable aspect of the scientific career.