Science and the General Election

Cat Ball (Science Policy Advisor)

The UK is in the grip of election fever. Political parties are campaigning, MPs are squabbling and policies are being debated. The rosettes are out in force, but where does science fit into this?

Most people would concede that science is never going to be a ‘doorstop issue’. Pledges about the science budget are unlikely to sway the general population when it comes to the location of their ‘X’ on 7 May.

However science is inextricably linked with effective government. The evidence the science community produces underpins health and environmental legislation, and that science that can be undertaken is itself critically dependent upon funding and regulation policy.

The next Government’s policies on research funding, immigration, education, environment, energy, health care and more will have real impact on the work of scientists in the UK, and the quality of our lives, and therefore demand our attention. To this end, the science community has once again come together to get science firmly and prominently on the agenda.

Several ‘hustings’ events, including a Science and the General Election event organised by the Society of Biology on behalf of the science community, have been held where candidates from across the parties have faced questioning from the science and engineering community. The Society have also worked with others including the Campaign for Science and Engineering to provide consistent messaging about why government support for science is vital for the UK’s economic growth and wellbeing.

At the last election in 2010, the science community achieved a ‘flat cash’ settlement for the science budget – no mean feat considering austerity measures that hit deep, far and wide. However, the UK’s reputation for world-leading research, and the foreign investment this generates, is at risk if the funding for science continues to be effectively eroded by inflation. We have the evidence to indicate that investment in science now will reap economic benefit in the future.

Support Science!

- The UK government spent £695 billion on our behalf last year; this equates to about £11,000 a year on behalf of each person in the UK. Of this, £160 — about 1.5% — was spent on science.

- The UK ranks 18th globally in terms of investment in science per capita. The USA, Ireland, Germany, South Korea, France, Norway and Australia are among the countries who invest more. Of these, the top spender is Norway, which spends £299 per person annually.

- For every £1 spent by the government on research and development (R&D), private sector R&D output rises by 20p per year.

- If government made a one-off increase in public spending on R&D of 5% of its total R&D spend (ie £450m of £9bn), market sector output would rise by £90m per year, every year.

- The UK is a world leader in many fields of research, producing over 10% of global scientific output with only 1% of the global population. Failure to invest in the science base will put this in jeopardy.