

EU exit negotiations

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As I write this article, three weeks post EU referendum, the nation and indeed the world is still reeling from the shock result and the political manoeuvring it has sparked within the UK. I hope that following the appointment of the new Prime Minister we may be about to enter a phase of calm negotiation aimed at defining the country's new relationship within Europe and indeed the future of the UK science base. It is clear that the true implications of leaving the European political union will be largely unknown for many months, or more likely years. So what can members of the scientific community actually do to influence the debate in a positive manner? To answer this question we need to consider the relationship between scientists and our elected and non-elected policy makers.

Within days of the referendum result I attended Parliamentary Links Day, a very timely event entitled "Science after the Referendum: What Next?". Although there were many passionate statements on the importance of science to the UK, our economy and the need to secure adequate funding for our sector, it was clear that nobody really knew where to go next. Thankfully, within a few days of this event, the wheels of Government had started to turn and the Biochemical Society's Policy Committee was busy responding to the first Brexit consultation from the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee.

Many MPs are very open about their lack of knowledge regarding science topics and the difficulties in making informed decisions, when voting on important scientific issues. The Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt Hon John Bercow has freely admitted to his lack of scientific understanding at every Parliamentary Links Day that I have attended. The number of MPs with a science PhD appears to total just one at the present time, however, at least 26 out of the 650 currently elected MPs appear to have a degree in a STEM/medical area¹ and at least 60 more have a declared interest in science². Unfortunately, this represents a decrease on the previous Parliament (2010-15) when over a hundred MPs were linked, in some way, to science and technology. So not a critical mass of science knowledge but it's a start nonetheless!

The lack of career scientists within the Government has always been an issue but at this crucial time it poses a particular challenge for UK science. MPs need, and do in fact regularly request to be better informed about the decisions they take and the effects their choices may have on the UK science base, the economy and societal impact. However, now more than ever, scientists from across the UK need to make their voices heard within the Westminster corridors of power to facilitate sensible and informed decision making.

Despite the presence of a number of MPs with a science background and the amount of information fed into government by individuals and groups with an interest in science policy. There is every chance that the voice of the science community may still not be loud enough to guarantee the kind of future that we all hope for. There are a number of primary issues we face during the EU exit negotiations, such as availability or replacement of EU funding, free movement of people, ability to maintain and form collaborative networks with other countries, cohesive regulatory frameworks that blend in with current EU rules and continued favourable access to EU science infrastructure. Yet the wider implications for Government, academia and industry and the amount of detail that needs to be negotiated, will only become clear over the next few months. The sheer volume of information that needs to be fed into the process will be vast and keeping up the momentum will be a huge challenge.

At this critical time, it is essential that all scientists do their part to influence the EU negotiation debate and help position UK science at the forefront of the Government's plans. So what can UK- and EU-based scientists do, especially those that have had little experience in practical science policy work in the past, to inform these discussions? Firstly, it will be important for members of all learned societies to respond to requests for information/evidence that can be fed to policy makers. You may wish to lobby your local MP as an individual, or perhaps take part in a pairing scheme such as that run by the Royal Society, were you work with an individual MP at Westminster and your host institution. There are many ways in which you can



become involved, and it is important to do so, as it will be by weight of numbers that we make our voice heard above the rest.

To achieve our goals, we need to clearly define what the scientific community wants and enforce the message that putting science at the forefront of the Government's priority list can benefit the entire population of the UK. This will be a Herculean task, as the lobbying of policy makers by scientists will need to occur at levels never before seen in this country. Yet the price if we fail could be catastrophic for a country that is widely seen as a global superpower of science and technological innovation.

Over the coming months, we will be working along with our sister learned societies and other organizations to urge the UK Government to ensure that both funding and opportunities for scientists to collaborate across the EU are priorities in the forthcoming negotiations.

In order to support these activities, we will continue to gather evidence and case studies to inform our engagement with policy makers. If you have been or expect to be affected by the changes, or have evidence of the challenges or any emerging opportunities for biochemistry, molecular biology and the wider biosciences, please share your experiences by writing to: policy@biochemistry.org. ■

References

1. Duncan Hull (May 8, 2015) MPs with Science Degrees: How did Science & Technology do in the UK General Election 2015? O'Really blog: <https://duncan.hull.name/2015/05/08/scientist-mps/>
2. MPs to Watch. CaSE website (accessed August 2016): <http://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/engaging-with-policy/science-in-westminster/mps-to-watch.html> (accessed August 2016)