Young scientists quiz key political figures on science policy topics

How will legislation on genetic engineering, cloning and animal experimentation change once the UK leaves the EU? What roles do scientific advice and public opinion play when considering policies where these viewpoints might oppose one another – for example the banning of GM crops? How will the merger of the nine current UK Research Councils into the new UK Research and Innovation affect the funding and delivery of novel research? These are just a few questions that were asked at this year’s Voice of the Future event in Parliament.

Voice of the Future is an annual event organised by the Royal Society of Biology on behalf of the science and engineering community, where young scientists from all over the country take the seats in a Committee room at the Parliament and question MPs and other Government officials on science policy topics.

This year the event involved Jo Johnson MP (Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation), Chi Onwurah MP (Shadow Minister for Industrial Strategy, Science and Innovation), Professor Sir Mark Walport (Government Chief Scientific Advisor), Stephen Metcalfe MP (Chair of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee), and his fellow Committee members, Dr Tania Mathias MP, Carol Monaghan MP and Matt Warman MP, acting as witnesses.

The Biochemical Society was represented by six bright young scientists: Alexander Cowley, PhD student at Exeter Medical School, Sarah Palmer, a PostDoc at the University of Glasgow, Nicola Payton, PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, Andrew Quigley, a PostDoc at the University of Oxford, Robin Runney, a PostDoc at the University of Southampton and Hannah Sutcliffe, a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh.

Diversity in science was a topic touched upon during all four panel discussions. Chi Onwurah MP said it was crucial that all scientists dedicated a part of their time to inspire the younger generation, particularly girls. The value of STEM ambassadors and role models was highlighted in this respect. When it came to discussing the diversity further down STEM pipeline, Carol Monaghan MP added that there was an expectation that working in science meant unsociable hours - options like job sharing, which are common in other areas, needed to be considered.

Our member Andrew Quigley had the opportunity to ask what the Government could do to further encourage commercialisation of university research. Jo Johnson MP responded that expansion of knowledge is a valuable exercise in itself, and added that the new Industrial Strategy and formation of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) will make research commercialization easier. Sir
Mark Walport, who had newly been appointed as the Chief Executive of UKRI, said having the overarching body will make the whole greater than the sum of its parts and ensure ‘interdisciplinary research doesn’t fall through gaps’.

Hannah Sutcliffe asked Sir Mark how the Government should prepare for the ethical challenges associated with emerging genetic technologies, such as genetic discrimination by potential employers or health insurers. Sir Mark said that it was important to understand that genetic modification wasn’t a good or a bad thing in itself, as it was all about the context in which it was applied. Two sides of the argument were discussed: research that may challenge people’s personal values, such as embryo research or research involving animals, and research that could alter the insurance market, by disclosing a person’s susceptibility to a particular disease. A good example of politicians addressing emerging technologies was mitochondrial DNA donation in 2015, which was debated and voted on at both Houses of Parliament before it could be implemented. Following this, in March this year researchers in Newcastle were given the first UK licence to carry out mitochondrial donation treatment. Sir Mark added that public engagement and effective regulation were key to preparation for the ethical challenges associated with emerging genetic technologies.

No science policy event can go without a mention of Brexit these days. The impact of Brexit on UK science was picked up by several young researchers: from potential changes in EU legislation to the Government’s plans to ensure that vital collaboration and communication will continue with European colleagues. To the latter, Jo Johnson MP replied by saying that the Government had been clear that European partners are valued and he hoped that collaborations would continue in years to come.

The Science & Technology Committee was also asked for their views on the fact that at the time of the event, the Department of Exiting the EU was one of the only Government Departments which didn’t have a Chief Scientific Adviser appointed. The Committee said that this was of concern and they had already raised it with the Department of Exiting the EU. However, they added that the Department was open to the Committee bringing scientists to them instead to ensure the science community has a way to feed into the discussions.

Carol Monaghan MP added that the brain-drain due to Brexit had already started and it was concerning that, in her view, there didn’t seem to be any measures that the Government was taking to stop it.

After the event, Alexander Cowley said: “The views of the Chief Scientific Advisor, Sir Mark Walport, in relation to ethics around genetic research were particularly interesting. I also found it useful to have the opportunity to network with other attendees from different Societies. Even though our specific disciplines may have been different, our common love of STEM subjects was enough to stimulate discussion.” Sarah Palmer added: “It was a great opportunity to hear MPs and the Chief Scientific Advisor answer questions about science policy and advising the Government. With uncertainties surrounding Brexit it was encouraging to hear such support for STEM research directly from MPs. This unique experience has encouraged me to get more involved in science policy in the future.”

We are pleased to be able to provide our young members with such a great opportunity to experience science policy first hand and look forward to next year’s event.

If you’re interested in getting more involved with the Society’s policy activities, why not join our new Policy Network! Contact science policy officer Gabriele Butkute gabriele.butkute@biochemistry.org for more information and to join.