



Tête-à-tête with Lord Sainsbury

Having attended the Institute's Affiliated Societies' *Science Priorities 2001* launch, the Science Minister, Lord Sainsbury, was so taken with the gathering of this biological consensus that he invited the Institute's Vice President and Chair of the Science Policy Board, Peter Caligari, for a personal follow-up meeting.

The tone of the meeting was frank but positive. Lord Sainsbury was receptive and sincere about what the Government could do. He asked which matters were most pressing. Prof Caligari summarised the priorities by calling for a comprehensive UK Strategy for Science. Notwithstanding this, short-termism was a recurring problem. Short-term contracts, while useful early on in a scientist's career, were now so dominating as to be actively discouraging scientists. Lord Sainsbury pointed to the Research Concordat.



Lord Sainsbury with Peter Caligari and Jonathan Cowie

This Caligari welcomed, but said it lacked teeth. Turning to the type of biology being encouraged, Caligari noted that over the past two decades whole-organism biology has very much taken second place to molecular biology, and said the balance between the two needs addressing. It is now important to apply molecular understanding to whole-organisms and the environment. There is an expertise gap here. Another career-related problem is that universities often do not play to their staff's strengths. While departments should have both a teaching and research function, not all teachers are good researchers and not all researchers are good communicators. Teaching-only staff are still often viewed as second class citizens in this RAE dominated world.

Funding was another key matter. What would happen to the former MAFF R&D

budget, badly eroded over the past one-and-a-half decades? Jonathan Cowie, Head of Science Policy, said that the UK science base – the 'R' in 'R&D' – had done well in terms of citation indices and other bangs for bucks. However, the UK was poor at getting science outputs onto the market. This 'D'-type applied and policy-driven research, coming from Government Departments and their agencies, continues to be in decline. Industry mainly funds close-to-market applied research. Lord Sainsbury replied that Prof David King (the Chief Scientific Advisor) is looking at science across Government.

Energy and environmental 'sustainability' was an issue of mutual concern. Sainsbury stated that, with North Sea production past its peak and nuclear power currently being phased out, the UK will need to

take some difficult decisions very soon. However, it is important that the public understand the problems, as this will help forge political consensus. Lord Sainsbury expressed his desire for the IOB and the other science-professional bodies to play a key role in orchestrating such public debate. Coincidentally, the Institute is already working with the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Physics on energy and the environment matters, and are running expert workshops on 'fuelling the future'.

'Balance' was the meeting's predominant theme. Balance the short-term with the long-term; balance molecular biology with whole organism biology; balance science base with Departmental funding. Caligari considered the meeting an important step in taking forward the Affiliated Societies' priorities.

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