

## A mycologist at Westminster

■ Gareth Wyn Griffith



The SGM and its members work hard to promote microbiology to government in the UK. This feature covers some recent interactions with parliamentarians both in Westminster and Scotland.

In December 2003 I was fortunate to participate in an MP-Scientist Pairing Scheme funded by the Royal Society as part of their Science in Society programme. This scheme involves 22 scientists from different UK universities and MPs representing their local areas. The aim of the scheme, which has run since 2001, is to provide scientists with an opportunity to learn about the workings of government and for MPs to learn what the job of a university-based scientist involves. My pair was Simon Thomas, the Plaid Cymru MP for

Ceredigion. Most MPs (Simon included) are not scientists (only 34 out of 659 have any significant scientific qualification, compared to 78 lawyers), so I was keen to find out how they assess scientific evidence presented to them, particularly when some of the issues under consideration are complex and may involve conflicting evidence. Scientists in general are poor at conveying their views to Parliamentarians, so I was also curious to find out how this was done.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were no specific mycological issues under discussion at Westminster during my shadowing period. By chance, however, there were several events which were relevant to my job as a university lecturer and to my research interests. The first of these was a meeting of the Select Committee on Science and Technology (SCST) at which the senior staff of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), an important funder of my research and that of many microbiologists, were being questioned. A similar meeting of this committee with the Medical Research Council (MRC) led to a highly critical report, and ultimately to a change in the MRC Chief Executive. This meeting was much more friendly, largely because Professor Julia Goodfellow and her BBSRC colleagues were very well briefed (having spent many months in preparation) and thus able to answer clearly the diverse questions thrown at them.

It is worth noting here that the Chair of SCST is Dr Ian Gibson, formerly a biology lecturer at the University of East Anglia and regarded by many biologists as our champion in Westminster. Despite being a Labour MP, he is certainly not averse to criticizing government policy or of adopting some pretty direct lines of questioning to elicit the necessary information from witnesses. One forthcoming enquiry is on a subject which affects many of us, particularly at smaller institutions, namely scientific publications. Evidence can be submitted by individuals, societies or institutions and the meetings of the Select Committees are usually open to the public (just walk into the Palace of Westminster and ask a policeman!).

In contrast to the meeting with BBSRC, a similar meeting in which the DEFRA Minister Margaret Beckett was

interviewed by the Environmental Audit Select Committee was far less satisfactory. This meeting was a follow-up to an earlier report by the Committee entitled *Waste – An Audit*. Everybody has heard of the fridge mountain (the 'F-word' as it was called in the meeting), but there may soon be a tyre mountain, a strange-sounding WEEE mountain (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) and even more worryingly, a hazardous waste mountain. These 'mountains' arise because of the Government's slow response to new EU legislation. The Hazardous Waste Directive (91/689/EEC) comes into force in July 2004 but there are no licensed sites in Wales and only 15 in the whole of the UK (if your lab has large amounts of old chemicals, get rid of them soon!). In this situation, and given that she also has to look after Agriculture and Fisheries (plus other environmental issues), there was little chance of Ms Beckett coming out of this well. Despite this and DEFRA's refusal to raise landfill tax to £35 per tonne (as the Committee's report had recommended), the questioning was polite, evidence-based and not obviously (to me) party-political. My MP is on this committee so I was able to find out a little more about how things worked. I had been impressed by how Simon and the other non-scientist MPs were able to ask some very incisive, technical questions and he admitted to me that this was the result of excellent briefing by the Committee Clerk and also the scientific specialist attached to the Committee. There is a Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology and also a number of specialists in the House of Commons library.

This expert briefing was equally apparent in a meeting of the same select committee later in the week which discussed the results of the farm-scale evaluations of GM crops. I had been surprised to learn that one of the witnesses was Professor Chris Pollock, director of our local BBSRC station (IGER – Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research), who chaired the Scientific Steering Committee which oversaw the trials. Chris was one of the people who interviewed me for my present job and someone who has been very helpful in guiding my research. However, he is no slouch as an inquisitor, so it was a strange experience to see him in the hot seat. Other witnesses were representatives of English Nature and the RSPB whose concerns about the ecological effects of GM crops had led to the establishment of the trials. Again the level of debate was of a high standard and at times quite scientific (e.g. the testing of null hypotheses) and by the end of the meeting there appeared to be a consensus that the trials were more useful in highlighting the damaging effects on biodiversity of modern agricultural practices (e.g. silage vs. haymaking) rather than GM crops per se.

On the Wednesday morning Central Lobby was filled with students from all over the UK (apart from Aberystwyth – train delays had caused them to miss a connection!) who arrived to lobby their MPs after the highlight of the Parliamentary week, Prime Minister's Questions. 'Grammar school boy' Michael Howard and 'public school boy' Tony Blair held an entertaining but unenlightening shouting match on the subject of university top-up fees in front of a full chamber. This was followed by a debate on the same subject as part of the Queen's Speech debate (with only about 50 MPs staying for this), though again this consisted mainly of reiteration of party policies. There was little

discussion of the key issues [e.g. should Governments set targets (or caps) on student numbers; what will be the effect of variable top-up fees on student numbers in courses such as microbiology which can be expensive to run, but do not guarantee a high income (in my experience) for graduates?]. The very nature of the Commons chamber is not conducive to reasoned discussion and I was far more impressed with the Select Committee meetings where the party politics is far less apparent.

My week in Westminster was a thoroughly enjoyable and educational experience. Meeting up with the other paired scientists was also very interesting, not just to talk shop, but also to compare experiences. These ranged from attending a dinner at the Korean embassy to appearing on TV in Kilroy. The reciprocal visit (mine will be in January 2004) also allows the MPs to gain some insight into the daily life of their scientist pairs. I am very grateful to the Royal Society for organizing this scheme and would recommend future pairing schemes most highly. There is even talk of extending the scheme to MEPs and shadowing in Brussels. Further details can be found at <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/scienceinsociety/data/parliament/index.html>.

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### Further reading

House of Commons Minutes of Evidence taken before Science and Technology Committee. *Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council: Scrutiny Session* – 1 December 2003. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmsctech/uc6-i/uc602.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmsctech/uc6-i/uc602.htm)

House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee. No. 3 of Session 2003–04 – 10 December 2003. *New inquiry: Scientific Publications*. [www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/science\\_and\\_technology\\_committee/scitech111203a.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/science_and_technology_committee/scitech111203a.cfm)

House of Commons Minutes of Evidence taken before Environmental Audit Select Committee. *Waste – Follow-up Inquiry* – 2 December 2003. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmenvaud/uc72-i/uc7202.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmenvaud/uc72-i/uc7202.htm)

Select Committee on Environmental Audit. *Waste – An Audit*. Fifth Report – 10 April 2003. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmenvaud/99/9904.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmenvaud/99/9904.htm)

House of Commons Minutes of Evidence taken before Environmental Audit Committee. *GM Food – Evaluating the Farm Scale Trials* – Wednesday 3 December 2003. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmenvaud/uc90-i/uc9002.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmenvaud/uc90-i/uc9002.htm)

## Science and the Scottish Parliament 2003

12 November 2003, Signet Library, Edinburgh

This annual event, run by the Royal Society of Chemistry, aims to raise awareness of science issues to MSPs and civil servants working in the Scottish Parliament. This year it focused on the environment as matters such as waste management, GM crops, energy and pollution dominate much of the work of MSPs.

The event was attended by 25 MSPs, three Government Ministers, a host of senior public and civil servants and over 160 scientists from all over Scotland. Experts from SGM were amongst the scientists there to explain how microbiologists can help to solve many of our most difficult environmental problems, including cleaning up land and water contaminated by waste from industrial processes, wiping out harmful bacteria like *E. coli*/O157 in farm animals and the food chain, keeping farmed fish healthy without polluting the sea or harming the well-being of humans and using microbes to make novel fuels to cut down greenhouse gas emissions.

Deputy First Minister and Science Minister, Jim Wallace MSP, gave the keynote speech and later visited the SGM stand to find out about some microbiology research.

Sir Harry Kroto, President of the RSC, gave the opening address saying that 'UK science is in the balance' and that there are three crises – in public understanding of science, in loss of qualified experts, and in science education in schools. Sarah Boyack MSP, Convener of the Parliament's Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, then focused on the real need for dialogue between scientists and

politicians, as scientific information is vital on a day-to-day basis for making policies and legislation in Government. Professor James Curran, from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, addressed the issue of public understanding of science, pointing out that, because of human rights implications, environmental concerns are no longer straightforward.

Eleanor Scott MSP, Green Party Spokesperson on the Environment, talked about the need for scientists to pause and reflect on their discoveries before rushing to apply them, as there is no bad science, just bad applications. Finally, Maff Smith from the

Scottish Renewables Forum, elaborated on the need in the UK to supply funds for new ideas for energy sources.

■ Faye Jones, Public Affairs Administrator

BELOW TOP: The SGM stand. From left to right: Peter Cotgreave (Save British Science), Faye Jones (SGM), Janet Hurst (SGM), Jim Wallace (Deputy First Minister, Scottish Parliament). PHOTO ROYAL SOCIETY OF CHEMISTRY

BELOW BOTTOM: SGM experts at the event. From left to right: Willie Russell, Geoffrey Schild, Brian Austin, James Neil. PHOTO RON FRASER, SGM



ABOVE: Gareth Griffith (left) with Simon Thomas (MP) at the Royal Society. COURTESY ROYAL SOCIETY