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 Schools programme. This scheme involves 22 scientists pairing with different UK universities and MPs representing those 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 of MPs to learn what the job of a university-based scientist involves. My pair was Simon Thomas, the Pldd 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 Science 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 Goosefowl and her BBSRC colleagues were very helpful. The MPs in attendance were very well briefed (having spent many months in preparation) and thus able to answer the clear and genuine questions put to them.

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