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DEMOCRATIC LEFT

# thinkpiece 19

## Why doesn't the left stand up for science?

By Sue Ferns, Head of Research, Prospect



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On 3 November, the Prime Minister gave a lecture in Oxford in which he argued that Government should stand up for science and reject an irrational public debate around it. Whilst Prospect does not entirely share the Prime Minister's vision of scientific achievement, we would in fact be bolder and argue that everyone who counts themselves as part of the political left should do more to stand up for science.

The Prime Minister focused on the importance of the commercial application of science. Yet good science doesn't always have commercial application and science in the public interest is under threat.

In the past couple of years the government has closed world-leading institutes and programmes including research into breast cancer, chemicals in food, and animal diseases. Research on the impacts of climate change, pollution and biodiversity all face substantial cuts. Staff remaining face uncertain futures, continual organisational reviews, and poor career prospects. No wonder then that morale is low, and many scientists vote with their feet even before the axe falls.

Furthermore, our own investigations show that once public research facilities close less than one in four of the staff find alternative employment in scientific research anywhere in the economy. This represents a major loss of investment in highly qualified and highly skilled staff. It also sends a very particular and negative message to students or university leavers who may be thinking about a career in science. The UK needs decent science pay and careers, otherwise highly marketable graduates will take their talents elsewhere.

But why should you be bothered? After all, there are many other urgent and important issues to occupy anyone with an interest in social justice – not least public services, the NHS and pensions. However, though the achievements of public science are often unsung, every one of us will in some way benefit from it.

Have you ever suffered from food-poisoning? If so, you'll know the importance of work to tackle diseases such as campylobacter and salmonella. Has anybody you know ever had medical treatment involving magnetic resonance imaging – for example to diagnose a tumour or a stroke? Do you think that biomass crops can help in combatting climate change? If so, thank a public sector scientist.

Though Mr Blair in his speech cited many examples of the UK's scientific achievements, what he didn't make clear is that most of these originated in the public sector. Public scientists also provide the front line of defence for disease outbreaks such as FMD, BSE and Avian flu. For example, it was scientists at the Government's Central Science Laboratory who confirmed that the corpse of the swan found in Scotland in April which had tested positively for the H5N1 strain of bird flu was a migratory Whooper swan. This led to a major revision of the risk management strategy which saved the taxpayer millions of pounds.

Of course, public science is not all instantly palatable or attractive. It is all too easy, for example, to see animal research or nuclear R&D as a public "bad" rather than as a public good. Yet 96% of family doctors agree that animal research has made an important contribution to many medical advances and, in the light of Stern's warnings about the urgent need to address climate change, there are huge risks in ignoring the future potential of carbon-free nuclear baseload generation.

Clearly there are concerns about the corporate role in scientific exploitation, but these must not be used as justification for anti-science sentiment. Undoubtedly there is a legitimate debate to be had about whether the means justify the ends and, following on from that, whether there are more effective ways to achieve the same ends. Scientists want, and must be allowed, to play a full part in that debate. Equally, those who choose to occupy the moral high ground must think through the consequences of their approach for quality of life. For example, is it really better either to risk repeated power cuts or to rely on imported French nuclear power than to maintain the UK's own capability?

And I make no apology for calling for higher priority to be given to the employment consequences of policy decisions – not as an



after-thought but as an integral part of the decision-making process. This requires a social partnership approach to address issues such as skill needs and capacity, occupational segregation, supply chains and regional impact. It also requires an even-handed commitment to dignity at work, recognising that all workers have the right to do their job safely and free from harassment. Too often scientists are treated either as infallible oracles or political scapegoats – depending on the mood of the moment.

It is an indictment of the continuing cycle of cuts and closures that since the spring Prospect has published three different briefings highlighting the difficulties facing various parts of the public sector science base .

“Who’s looking after British science?”, launched at a lobby of the Westminster Parliament in March, focuses on the research councils. “Who’s looking after Scottish science?”, formed the basis of a lobby of the Scottish Parliament in June, and focuses primarily on the research facilities funded by the Scottish Executive. “Who’s looking after Defra science?”, published in September, highlights the valuable work of that department’s science-based agencies.

Prospect is not opposed to change where it is needed and justified we are not saying that this is an anti-science Government – far from it. But in trying to understand how we have reached the current parlous position, we are bound to conclude that there is a strategic failure across Government to take on the key responsibility of care for the national science base. We know that devolved decision-making is the fashion, but it is not appropriate in every case. In this context, it allows departments and research institutes that proceed to cut or close facilities on the basis of business cases that may make sense in the context of their own narrow remits, but have no regard for the wider implications or potential losses to Britain’s core scientific capability.

One example is the decision of the Natural Environment Research Council in March to close four sites of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology despite widespread condemnation from across the scientific community. As a result 40% of the climate change research programme is being cut and 20% will cease altogether.

Add to this the effects of complex, competitively-based funding arrangements that leave many research institutes with a low level of core funding from their parent bodies. It only takes a change in research priorities by one funding body to destabilise the entire organisation.

Finally, the Government simply does not know how many scientists it employs, let alone their areas of expertise. It therefore cannot make any credible assessment of its own capability to meet future needs. This worries us, not just because it directly affects our members, but because we genuinely believe that the nation’s science base needs and deserves better care.

For these reasons, at the TUC in September Prospect published a Charter for Public Science setting out the actions the Government needs to take to contain the mounting crisis in public science. The Charter calls for recognition of the crucial role played by science for the public good; decent pay and careers for staff – based on a better knowledge of existing capability; a halt to cost-driven lab closures and privatisation; and open decision-making. We also want a Cabinet Minister with authority and accountability for public sector science and a similar Ministerial role in the devolved administrations.

To date 43 elected politicians, unions representing 1.5 million members, the TUC itself, the National Union of Students and 250 concerned individuals have signed the Charter and/or written to their MP about it. Yet, we still haven’t had a satisfactory answer our question “Who’s looking after UK science?”

In the public interest, it is about time we did.

## **Sue Ferns**

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### References

- 1 Our Nation’s Future – “Britain’s path to the future – lit by the brilliant light of science”
- 2 These briefings are published on Prospect’s website at [www.prospect.org.uk](http://www.prospect.org.uk) and are available in hard copy from Prospect HQ (Tel: 020 7902 6623).

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and develop the ideas for a more equal  
and democratic world, then  
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