

Never had it so good?

The Blair–Brown era has been a golden one for British science.

Anyone remember Save British Science? Twenty-one years ago, with universities in decline, laboratories in disrepair and academics packing their bags to head in the general direction of California, there was plenty of meat for the pressure group of that name to sink its teeth into. Today, the shrill sound of the name seems almost quaint.

No one would claim that British scientists today live in the best of all possible worlds, but there is no denying that, in many disciplines and departments, British science is in rather good shape, thank you very much. The country's universities have their problems but do well in international comparisons; research-intensive industries, such as pharmaceuticals, are prospering; and scientific leaders have a respected voice in national affairs. In 2005, Save British Science accordingly transformed itself into the rather more staid-sounding Campaign for Science and Engineering.

This happy state of affairs is one success for which Tony Blair, Britain's outgoing prime minister, and Gordon Brown, set to be his successor, can share credit — a success that the political world has not fully appreciated. Blair is not viscerally grabbed by science in the same way as Al Gore, but he is attracted by its inherent modernity, and has been steadfast in supporting Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer, in his deeper devotion to the issue.

Brown sees science and innovation at the very core of his national modernization project. As the Labour Party's spokesman on trade and industry soon after Save British Science was set up, he read, absorbed and planned. The outcome was the decision by 'New Labour', which he and Blair brought into being, to ditch the party's traditional attachment to applied research and industrial policy, and concentrate instead on backing basic science while creating a better climate for entrepreneurial innovation.

Blair announced on 10 May that he was resigning; on 27 June, barring acts of God, Brown will succeed him. (The bookmaker William Hill, to which *Nature* regularly turns on matters of political prognosis, is already paying out to punters with money wagered on Brown's ascendancy.) For science, this should mean more of the same. Brown has made it crystal clear that the government's commitment to investment must continue. One of his last acts at the Treasury has been to

publish a ten-year spending plan that foresees substantial further growth in research spending.

However, there are two notable concerns on the horizon. One is that, faced with day-to-day responsibility for everything from hospital waiting lists to the occupation of Iraq, Brown is bound to leave decisions about science and innovation in the hands of colleagues. Few senior Labour politicians other than Brown have shown much interest in, or commitment to, science, so this change could bode ill.

Second, Brown's electoral prospects are less bright than those of Blair before the past three elections. Brown leads a party with which the electorate is disenchanted against a Conservative opposition that has found new appeal under the leadership of David Cameron. There is scant indication that the Conservatives are champing at the bit to invest money in the universities. Instead, they are likely to seek reductions in public spending in almost all areas that are less politically sensitive than health or schools — areas such as scientific research.

This puts a new onus on British researchers. Their current happy state is not of their own making. With the plucky and laudable exception of Save British Science, the research community has done little to improve its lot. Now it should give its support to the renamed Campaign for Science and Engineering, and do what it can to maintain the happy status quo.

Researchers should make it a priority to communicate their accomplishments to politicians of all parties and to the public at large, thus justifying the generosity they have received. The scientists closest to the levers of power should identify those among their number best suited to the key jobs, such as director-general of the research councils, that can exert real budgetary influence. And the community as a whole should be building alliances — with industry, consumers (especially of healthcare), environmentalists and everyday geeks — that will sustain political support for science in the long term. British science has had the good fortune to be saved by far-sighted politicians. But its future lies in its own hands. ■

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Health cheques

Philanthropy offers a valuable approach to funding.

In scientific funding, as in agriculture, monoculture is risky. However well-meaning and diligent its paymasters may be, a field that has only one source of funding runs the risk of missing opportunities and succumbing to a shared perception of what is possible and what is not. Diversity is thus to be prized. The current increase

in scientific funding from individual philanthropists, private foundations and non-profit organizations, particularly in biomedical science (see page 248 and www.nature.com/news/specials/philanthropy), is a welcome development in a field that is largely dominated by governments.

With this new money come new attitudes. Philanthropists tend to have strong and clear ideas about what should be funded. If, as many of the new wave did, they made their money in industries that are themselves driven by research, they will often want to delve deeper into what scientists are actually doing than the foundations