

Moment of reckoning

Tough choices lie ahead in UK research policy, and they need to be debated openly in the general election campaign, says **Colin Macilwain**.

Science issues are set to receive a wider airing than usual in the British general election campaign, which, after running on slow-burn all winter, officially kicked off last week. With the country facing an estimated £166-billion (US\$250-billion) fiscal deficit this year and its biggest sector — financial services — in intensive care, politicians are looking to science, technology and innovation as a possible path to an export-led economic recovery.

But rhetorical differences aside, the laissez-faire approach of the three main parties is basically the same: spend on science and engineering in the universities, leave industry well alone and hope that innovation will flourish. No one has had the time or inclination to formulate anything more radical, despite nagging suspicions that this approach is not equal to Britain's daunting competitiveness challenges.

This is unfortunate in a country that, whatever its other woes, remains a major power in many scientific disciplines. Voters need to know what the parties' real research priorities will be when, as many economists forecast, public spending falls by 10% or more over the next four years. The electorate — especially that portion of it about to be thrown out of work by these spending cuts — should be asking how well research spending will serve its needs. Most of all, the parties need to explain how, after 30 years of spurning the kind of industrial policies pursued by France and Germany, Britain can achieve export-led growth.

Record to defend

Encouraged by the example set by Barack Obama in his campaign for the US presidency, the ruling Labour Party is portraying the opposition Conservative Party as anti-science, alleging with some justification that they are likely to make large cuts to science and university funding. But Labour will struggle to put this argument across. They are cutting science too — £600 million in 'efficiency savings' have already been requested from the universities — and it is they, not the Conservatives, who have a 13-year record to defend.

Part of this record is outstanding. In a move personally orchestrated by Prime Minister Gordon Brown when he was chancellor of the exchequer, the Labour government has doubled the annual university research budget to £6 billion over the past decade. Other aspects



of Labour's record are less impressive. Industrial research spending has stagnated, and government laboratories, in everything from agriculture to defence, have been scaled back or closed.

Labour has also done little to shift research priorities towards meeting social goals — in housing, health and transport, for example — as opposed to commercial ones. It has consulted endlessly with business interests, but seldom stooped to listen to its main groups of supporters, the liberal-minded middle classes and the shrunken industrial working class, who might benefit from a different set of research priorities. And it largely missed the opportunities that arose after the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) outbreaks and the public's rejection of genetically modified food to develop more advanced approaches to public consultation.

Paul Drayson, the biotechnology entrepreneur who has served as Labour's science minister since 2008, says that he has sought to break down elitism in science and to welcome a broad range of voices, on issues such as stem cells and nanotechnology. He even says, in response to the charge that Labour only heeds the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), that Labour is listening to the trade unions.

However, only last month, the government began a crucial, early consultation on future research priorities that will include the Royal Society and the CBI, yet exclude the unions, local authorities, and environmental groups.

The Conservative Party, which, according to the bookmakers, remains likely to form the next government, is doing its best to avoid firm commitments that might limit its future room for manoeuvre. Its clearest position is that more attention should be paid to teaching at universities.

Party leader David Cameron — perhaps

fearing unfavourable comparisons with Brown's impressive Oxford lecture on science (see go.nature.com/6rNuES) — dropped plans to devote a speech to the topic last summer. Cameron instead commissioned a report on innovation from James Dyson, the inventor of stylized vacuum cleaners. Last month, Cameron welcomed its findings — without promising to implement them. These included more focused research-and-development tax credits and more sponsorships for science and engineering students.

Deciding vote

The most progressive noises in the campaign so far have come from the Liberal Democrats, led by Nick Clegg, whose ambition is to hold the balance of power after the election. Their science spokesman, Evan Harris, has called for the government to adopt the Royal Society's recommendations on the treatment of independent scientific advice. He also wants reform of the libel laws to protect free scientific discussion in light of the case of Simon Singh, a science writer whose legal battle with chiropractors has become a cause célèbre for liberals and rationalists.

The Royal Society sought to lay the ground for the consideration of science issues ahead of the 6 May election by publishing a report, *The Scientific Century*, on 9 March. The authors hoped that it might replicate the influence of *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, a similar report published by the US National Academy of Sciences in 2007, which presaged \$21 billion of additional science spending by the US Congress. Britain won't have the money for that kind of thing — science instead faces a severe funding crunch.

A series of three live, televised debates will now take place between the three party leaders for the first time and will, at the media's insistence, come to dominate the campaign. The embattled prime minister should use these to advertise some of his under-exposed knowledge of and compassion for science, and challenge anticipated Conservative spending cuts.

Until the September 2008 financial crisis, Brown's campaign message to Britain would have echoed that of Conservative prime minister and one-time publisher of this journal, Harold Macmillan in 1957: "You've never had it so good." Scientists haven't, and they know it. But no government can now save them from the austerity ahead. ■

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