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The test for Abenomics

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been buoyed by election success, but he must show that his science policies take the opinions of researchers into account.

The Japanese Liberal Democratic Party's decisive win in last Sunday's upper-house election was an impressive show of support for a sitting prime minister in a country that tends to chew its political leaders up and spit them out in short order. Especially popular with voters are Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's programmes for financial stimulus, which have started to breathe life into a country in a state of economic paralysis.

So what does the re-election mean for research and science? Abe, who took office last September, has been relatively generous with the scientific purse strings so far, and a prime minister who stays in power for more than a year might bring some stability to vacillating science policies. For example, the country's Council for Science and Technology Policy, once a strong body that set and streamlined science priorities, has in the past three years been reduced to rubber-stamping the decisions of others. Now it is set to resurge.

Abe has political capital to spend. But he may yet choose to use it to push positions that are unpopular with both scientists and the public.

First among them is his stand in favour of nuclear power. All polls show that most people in Japan do not want the country's reactors — shut down after the 2011 Fukushima accident — to be restarted. Yet Abe is pushing for that. The prime minister has tried to press the idea that the dysfunctional nuclear regulatory system that exacerbated the Fukushima accident has been fixed, but events in the past few weeks have shown that neither Fukushima's ominously steaming reactors nor the country's regulatory system are yet working correctly. The latest event to draw outrage was the discovery that Fukushima's operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, this year waited for more than a month before admitting that radioactive water from the plant was leaking into the sea. The Japanese Nuclear Regulation Authority actually did its job, drawing public attention to the contamination weeks ago. But what power does the regulatory system have if the nuclear operator can be so slow to respond? Suspicious observers are already suggesting that it waited until after the election to confirm the bad news.

Abe's support for science is also getting mixed reviews. His emphasis on technology transfer has hit a popular chord with industrialists, as have his plans to merge biomedical research funding under a body inspired by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). But the planned Japanese NIH is quite different from its namesake — it is intended to focus on applied science, and will be supervised mostly by Abe and bureaucrats, rather than by scientists (see *Nature* **499**, 136–137; 2013).

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This could send science off course. Already, Japan has focused too optimistically on induced pluripotent stem cells, and funding is set to increase further. The country should give more thought to what science and clinical applications are likely to emerge. Scientists in other fields feel they are being shunned. Is the Japanese NIH going to provide balance? It should, but Abe's proposal does not promise to do so.

A genuine copy of the US NIH — one that seeks and takes into account the opinions of scientists — could be a real boon in Japan. Yet for now, most scientists see the proposals as a threat, especially given that they are being implemented from the top down.

As the election results show, Abe is doing something right. Introducing more science and less politics to the operation of this NIH-like agency would be an early way to show that he can listen as well as lead. ■

Forensics fiasco

Inconsistent standards and a lack of research investment have left UK legal science in chaos.

This publication is steadfast in promoting the benefits of funding for research, but even we might not say that reductions in cash for science could be allowing murderers and rapists to roam our streets. We don't have to: Andrew Miller has said it for us.

Miller leads the combative but respected (and cross-party) science select committee in the UK House of Commons. The committee last week produced a damning report — its second in just over three years — on the state of forensic science in the country. In his alarming sound bite, Miller neatly summarized the need for urgent government action, including dedicated funds for research into better sleuthing methods.

The British system is a perfect case study of a wider forensics malaise. The Forensic Science Service, which provided services to police forces across the nation, was subjected to a disastrous attempt at privatization before being closed in March 2012. Police laboratories have inconsistent standards, and private companies have been asked to fill the gap.

The problems that Miller's committee identifies are long-standing. But this time the politicians have upped the rhetorical ante, expressing concern that the minister responsible for forensic science "appeared to have so little understanding of the subject".

The shortcomings in this field are not restricted to the United Kingdom. In February, the US Department of Justice announced a new National Commission on Forensic Science that will develop guidance across the spectrum of forensics, from courtroom to laboratory, on matters such as professional codes. It is sorely needed: just last month, the Department of Justice announced that more than 2,000 criminal cases were being reviewed because of problems with hair-sample analysis. Forensic science holds great power over the lives and liberty of individuals. Now it must reclaim its great responsibility. ■