

# What's in a name?

Britain has a new leader, and with him a new science minister in a new department: would you guess that the 'Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills' now holds the remit for science?

On 28 June, Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair as UK Prime Minister. In the days that followed, a wholesale reshuffle of the Cabinet was announced, as Prime Minister Brown set his mark on a new 'New Labour' government. Change is in the air across the administration, as Blairism makes way for Brownism.

Change has also been decreed in the governmental handling of science research. Ian Pearson is the new Science Minister, under Secretary of State John Denham, who heads the newly created Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). The DIUS comprises chunks of what was the Department of Education and what was the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The DTI itself became home to the science remit only in 1995, when the Office of Science and Technology (OST, created in 1992) was shuffled into its brief. In February 2006, within the DTI, the OST merged with the Innovation Group to form the Office of Science and Innovation.

Following that somewhat tortuous history, science now resides in a department that identifies itself by the three pillars of innovation, universities and skills. Organizations such as Universities UK (a university and higher-education body) profess satisfaction with the new system. Others, however, have expressed some reservation over the lack of explicit mention of 'science': Martin Rees, President of the Royal Society, has said that he "would have preferred the word 'science' to have appeared in the new department's title."

This is not nit-picking, the profile of science in the UK is cause for concern. In 1998, Tony Blair wrote<sup>1</sup> that "the science base is the absolute bedrock of our economic performance". Indeed, during the ten years of the Blair government the science budget increased in real terms, but — as Robert May, Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK government from 1995



to 2000, comments<sup>2</sup> in a recent article in *Nature* — that increase has not kept pace with the demands of the research that would maintain that bedrock of economic performance. Researchers rightly feel squeezed.

This coming autumn, the outcome of the latest Comprehensive Spending Review is expected, and as yet cannot be guessed. But in the meantime, at the HM Treasury website, you can play the 'spending review game' (<http://csr07.treasury.gov.uk>): adjust the levels of spending in diverse areas — health, housing, transport, and so on — and see how well you could manage the public purse. It's fun, but it's sobering to see in the 2007–8 budgetary starting levels that 'science and technology' ranks bottom of the pile in the amount of cash allocated, some way behind 'international

development assistance'. Frustratingly, all budgetary increases in the game are capped at 100% — but then that would be too much to expect, even in the most optimistic of times.

At the top of the list detailing the role<sup>3</sup> of the new DIUS is "sustain and develop a world-class research base". That, of course, requires investment, and it is to be hoped that the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review will set the UK on that course. At the bottom of the list is "increase the supply of people in science, technology, engineering and mathematics". And there the declining profile of science in the UK hits home.

A growing number of pupils in secondary education are taught physics by a teacher who has no degree-level qualification in the subject. In recent years, the number of university science courses offered across the UK has declined. Several university physics and chemistry departments have closed, as a consequence of funding constrictions in the new 'market' that sees students as 'customers'. In this month's 'Futures' essay by Craig DeLancey (page 580), a desperate department head has a cunning plan to entice more customers with a degree in 'fictional physics' — it's, sadly, a not-too-far-fetched extrapolation of the worrying situation in the UK (and elsewhere in the world).

While UK science, and physics in particular, continues to face such a shortfall in people and opportunities, inventing new government departments and acronyms is surely akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. If the DIUS can really tackle this issue with the priority it needs and deserves, that might be some compensation for the lack of 'science' in its title.

## References

1. Blair, T. *Science* **281**, 1141 (1998).
2. May, R. *Nature* **447**, 1053 (2007).
3. [www.dius.gov.uk/role.htm](http://www.dius.gov.uk/role.htm)