

Britain's shadow science minister believes in experts

With the present government in Britain under extreme pressure to call an election, **Robin McKie** interviews the Conservative spokesman on science and education, who feels that the major research companies should be more open about the research they undertake. But expert committees should be left to experts

ASK a group of working scientists to react to the name of Mark Carlisle and it is likely that their responses will include a fair number of vague and inaccurate replies. This may not be particularly surprising but one cannot avoid feeling there should be a little more interest and reaction to a man who could shortly become overall leader of Britain's science effort.

In a surprise Shadow Cabinet reshuffle late last year, UK Opposition leader Mrs Margaret Thatcher appointed Mr Carlisle Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Science—in place of the previous, ebullient incumbent, Norman St John Stevas. Of course, the move does not automatically guarantee him the post of Education and Science Secretary in the increasingly likely event of the Conservatives bringing down the present Labour Government—but one only has to look to the example of Mrs Thatcher who held the same Shadow Cabinet post in 1970 and was appointed Secretary after Ted Heath won the general election that year. And it would also be strange to appoint another person just as Mr Carlisle had achieved some understanding of the complexities of the job.

So it seems timely to focus attention on the views of this 50-year-old barrister who may shortly influence so much of Britain's science policy. However, perhaps not surprisingly, Mr Carlisle is still reluctant to commit himself to particular doctrines or attitudes, stressing frequently that he will be guided throughout by the professional scientists and the various research advisory bodies. It is a natural reaction of a man new to the science arena, although one can already discern a less piercing or forceful interest in particular scientific topics than that shown by the present Secretary Mrs Shirley Williams, who has occasionally revealed great interest in subjects of special public concern such as genetic engineering.

However, some attitudes do become clear. In particular, Mr Carlisle shows a keen concern that science must be more closely tailored to suit the needs of British industry. In educational terms, this is reflected in a desire to increase emphasis on sandwich courses,

part-time education and polytechnic training.

And he particularly believes that greater encouragement must be given to further education at non-advanced, technician levels to provide necessary skilled manpower. "I think that one can foresee for the universities a period of consolidation, rather than expansion, and that any shift within the whole of education must go to scientific education and education in practical skills beyond the age of 16".

"The polytechnics have tended to move away from their original design and become less areas of technical education and more areas of general education. I think we have got to put the emphasis back on training the engineers and scientists that industry needs", he stated.

Mr Carlisle also stresses that more encouragement must be given to industry to carry out its own research rather than rely on strong Government backing all the time. "The Conservative philosophy is that Government should get off industry's back and leave it enough money for expansion which will allow more research. This will come from improving the tax structure and economic atmosphere of the country".

But if he is keen to tie science more closely to industry, then Mr Carlisle is less willing to have interference in the actual work of scientists. For instance he is quite adamant in his opposition to lay or union representation in bodies such as the Dangerous Pathogens Advisory Group or even the Genetic Manipulation Advisory Group.

"These are advisory boards on highly technical subjects and have to advise Government. If you are deciding on the appropriate degree of safety for testing then it seems to me that this is an area only in which the qualified are able to speak with authority", he added.

Instead Mr Carlisle believes, rather naively it may seem, that public opinion—"the most vociferous lobby in the country"—provides the best form of surveillance of the scientists' activities. However, on the subject of the Press, the major shapers of public opinion, he is less enthusiastic. "The newspaper reporting of science is probably no worse than the newspaper reporting of



Mark Carlisle: opposes union representation on GMAG and DPAG

anything else. It is only the bad news that makes the headlines".

But he does maintain that there should be greater openness in allowing more reporting of scientific matters. "I am quite sure that the major research companies have nothing to be ashamed of and should always be willing to speak to people and make it clear that they have nothing to hide."

On the more vexed problem of staff stagnation and ageing populations at universities, Mr Carlisle—in keeping with most other public figures—offers little in the way of comfort or solutions for the future.

"I am conscious that there is a feeling among younger members of university departments that today an awful lot of them are waiting to fill dead men's shoes. That is the root cause of the feeling of frustration among younger university lecturers.

"Sadly I don't think there is any simple solution. However, I think we have to invite the University Grants Committee completely to review the whole situation, particularly the question of levels of senior staff, and also encourage the setting up of fellowships, like the present SRC initiatives, to take up some of the strain".

And it is to be hoped that these measures, and the others outlined by Mr Carlisle, will prove in some way to be effective—for in a very short period they could be put into rapid practice. When, and if, that happens, we can then perhaps expect a little more reaction to the name of Mark Carlisle. □