

Extract from Hansard for Thursday 10 January 2008

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

Oral Answers to Questions

INNOVATION, UNIVERSITIES AND SKILLS

4. Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): If he will increase financial support for science in north-west and if he will make a statement. [177249]

The Minister for Science and Innovation (Ian Pearson): The science budget is not allocated on a regional basis. However, it will grow over the next three years from £3.4 billion this year to £4 billion in 2010–11. Universities in the north-west are well placed to share in that growth.

Ann Winterton: Is the Minister aware of the potential damage that will be caused by the Government's reduction in support for academic research in science and its impact on Manchester university's school of physics and astronomy, including Jodrell Bank observatory, one of the world's leading astronomical centres, which last year celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Lovell telescope? Will he review urgently the £80 million shortfall in research funding to prevent damage to the United Kingdom's research capacity and effectiveness in physical science, and to its international reputation?

Ian Pearson: It might help the House if I put a couple of facts on record. The budget of the Science and Technology Facilities Council is going up over the next three years by 13.6 per cent.—an increase of £185 million over the budgetary period. The STFC will spend £1.9 billion during that three-year period, a significant proportion of which will be spent in the north-west. Like other research councils, the STFC has to make some difficult decisions, and it has to decide what its priorities should be. The Government are concerned about the health of all the disciplines, which is one of the reasons we have asked Research Councils UK to undertake a series of reviews of the health of the disciplines, starting with physics. Bill Wakeham will lead that review, and its terms and references have been scoped out.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): The noble Lord Sainsbury of Turville created three important science sites in Britain at Harwell, near Oxford, where the diamond synchrotron project is now operating, and one at Daresbury in Cheshire, which serves all the northern universities. Is my hon. Friend aware that 300 to 400 jobs—three quarters of the staff at the Daresbury site—are at risk due to the £80 million shortfall in the STFC budget? I recognise what my hon. Friend says about significant increases in the STFC budget, but it appears to have been badly handled in this financial year.

Ian Pearson: The Government remain absolutely committed to developing Daresbury and Harwell as sites and innovation campuses. Figures have been quoted in some of the press in the north-west about potential job losses, and I say in response that for a number of years there have been plans to close the second generation light source, or SRS, and some redundancies will be associated with that. Because of the difficult decisions the STFC has had to make, it has announced a voluntary redundancy programme for all its sites, not just Harwell, but Daresbury and in Scotland as well. It will be some time before the pattern of voluntary redundancies becomes clear. I do not think that it is right to say that there is a definite figure for job losses at Daresbury or anywhere else. The Government will, of course, continue to monitor the situation closely.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Dr. Brian Cox of Manchester university's school of physics and astronomy has said:

"Scientific research is not a luxury, it is a necessity".

I am concerned that most of the cuts that will occur as a result of the £80 million shortfall will not be to major facilities, but to small grants going to physics and astrophysics departments, not only in the north-west, but throughout the country. What assurances can the Minister give that that bedrock of blue skies research in physics and astrophysics, which brought us things such as the MRI scanner, will be protected?

Ian Pearson: I agree with Dr. Brian Cox that scientific research is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity, and in the north-west, a great deal of world-class scientific research is conducted. During the past few weeks, the university of Liverpool have been developing a model that can predict the risk of any person developing lung cancer in a five-year period. The university of Manchester, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, has discovered a key process that may be involved in the spread of cancer, which could lead to new treatments to stop 80 to 90 per cent. of cancers in their tracks. A great deal of research into other matters, too, is being undertaken at north-west universities. As I said earlier, the budgets of all research councils have grown—for example, the STFC budget has increased by 13.6 per cent. and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's budget has increased significantly. However, it is up to research councils to determine their priorities, based on their best assessment of the science. There will be change because we live in a changing world and difficult decisions have to be taken, but it is best if those best placed to make the judgments are allowed to do so.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Ann Winterton) and other hon. Members have demonstrated the effects around the country of the £80 million deficit in the science budget. The problems are also manifesting themselves internationally through our potential withdrawal from the linear collider project among others. The Minister, given his responsibility, must have some interest in our embarrassing withdrawal. Doubtless, he shares some of the embarrassment, but does he accept any responsibility for the problems that are affecting our international reputation?

Ian Pearson: I have a deep and abiding interest in science and the ability of our science base to contribute to our economic prosperity and social well-being in future. I passionately believe that it is vital to continue to invest in science. That is one of the reasons for the Government's doubling the science budget in the past 10 years. It will triple by 2010–11.

I ask the hon. Gentleman to look at some of the facts: the STFC's budget is increasing by 13.6 per cent. and the overall science budget is increasing from £3.4 billion to £4 billion. Yes, difficult decisions must be made. On particle physics, the STFC says that its priority is CERN—I believe that that is right and that it will be recognised as such by the scientific community.

Gap....

T9. [177280] **Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): I know that my hon. Friend is aware of the concern in the science community, in particular the physics sector, about the allocation of science funding, not least from the volume of questions asked by hon. Members this morning. I am sure that many will welcome the review of science funding announced by the Secretary of State. I am not certain that institutions that have invested

heavily in physics, such as Durham university in my constituency, will be comforted by simply referring the matter to the research councils. Is there more that the Government could do to protect physics research in those excellent institutions, so that they remain economically competitive in terms of international research?

Mr. Denham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. It is important to make a big statement of principle on this issue. The Haldane principle, established many years ago, says that Ministers should not intervene directly in the funding decisions of research councils. That is to protect the autonomy of research councils in deciding where research should take place. When the Science and Technology Facilities Council made its proposals, despite its above-inflation increase in grant, to reduce certain areas of physics expenditure, it would not have been appropriate to breach the Haldane principle, to step in and to take money away from the Medical Research Council and give it to the STFC. However, because of the concerns, I did my job by asking Professor Bill Wakeham, the vice-chancellor of Southampton university, to produce a report on the health of physics as a discipline, which will consider our overall funding of physics, including those areas that have attracted controversy. As the Secretary of State, I have done what it is right for me to do and—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have to stop the Secretary of State there.