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**James Naughtie:** The dire warnings from physicists that university courses and important research were facing swinging cuts have been confirmed with the announcements that all new grants are going to be cut by 25 per cent. The Government body that controls investment is also pulling out of a project known as the International Linear Collider; and that's a decision described by its director at Oxford University as "scientific vandalism."

Well, our Science Correspondent Tom Fielden is here.

You've been reporting on this previously, Tom, and it does seem as if the decisions that have been made are just as bad as some of those in the physics world we're fearing.

**Tom Fielden:** Bluntly, it's every bit as bad as scientists had feared. This news came at a meeting of the Science & Technology Facilities Research Council, which is the main funding body for physics and astronomy...

**James Naughtie:** That channels Government money into research projects, for example.

**Tom Fielden:** That's right. A bit like the MRC does for medical science. This is the one for physical sciences, if you like. The Chief Executive Keith Mason spelt out how they were going to cope with this £80m shortfall in their budget that we'd been reporting, and as you say, it involves an across-the-board cut of 25 per cent in all new grants. The Research Council is going to pull out of a number of high-energy gamma ray astronomy experiments; some solar physics; and this prestige project, the International Linear Collider, with immediate effect. Now, by all accounts it was a pretty angry meeting. I'm told one senior physicist demanded to know when he should tell all his postdoc students they were sacked, and was told in no uncertain terms 'we haven't worked out all the details yet.'

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**James Naughtie:** But the consequence of these cuts is going to be obvious: there was going to be shrinkage in research projects and university courses.

**Tom Fielden:** That's right. And I don't think it's actually going to stop here, because at the same time as the physicists were meeting in this country, the 20 member states involved in Europe's biggest scientific project - building the large Hadron Collider at CERN on the Swiss-French border - were meeting in Geneva to... and they were meeting to agree an increase in the project's £500m budget. Now, that's something that Britain - which is heavily involved in the project and has been championing - had been campaigning in favour of. But I understand at the last minute the UK delegation was instructed to vote against any increase, which is pretty embarrassing, really. And of course, if the UK's European partners approve the budget it's something the STFC will still have to find the money for. So even as these across-the-board cuts go through, we may yet be looking for even more money.

**James Naughtie:** Now, the STFC - this Science and Technology Facilities Council - does the dirty work, as it were, as some scientists will see it; but it's quite clearly a Treasury decision, isn't it?

**Tom Fielden:** Well, quite whose fault it is is still a bit shrouded in mystery, to be honest. It looks very much as if the STFC prepared a budget, went to the Treasury, said 'this is what we think we're going to have to spend'. Then there were some cost overruns with some rather large prestige projects, which had not been factored into these calculations. And so it seems that they were under the impression that they wouldn't have to pay for these extra costs. And when they went back to the Treasury with revised figures, it looks as if they got the blank stare, so to speak, and the Government have not followed up on that commitment.

**James Naughtie:** Tom Fielden, thanks very much.

We're joined by Phil Willis, Liberal Democrat MP and Chair of the Select Committee that monitors the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, into whose purview this comes.

Good morning.

**Phil Willis MP:** Good morning, Jim.

**James Naughtie:** What do you make of this?

**Phil Willis MP:** Well, I think it's an absolute mess. Here we have a Government which is committed, even in its own document, to maintaining access to world-class experimental facilities, and yet at the same time it's cutting back - particularly on Astronomy, which is decimated by these cuts; but particularly it's cutting back on Particle Physics and Physics, the very subjects that we are... the Government is desperate to get particularly young scientists involved in and to keep them there.

**James Naughtie:** What's also curious about this is that there were guarantees given when the STFC was set up - there was a new mechanism being produced; that the... it was denied that there would be any cuts of this sort.

**Phil Willis MP:** Well, there were, because, I mean, I was actually a member of the committee that looked at the proposals to move from what was the old Particle Physics and Astronomy Council to the new STFC, and that assurance was actually given by the Minister at the time - the Minister of Science, Malcolm Wicks, at the time - that in these transitional period [*sic*] there would not, in fact, be a loss. The real problem here, Jim, is that Britain is committed to these very, very major projects - particularly the stuff at CERN and Diamond, one of the big colliders who are within the UK; and you can't simply pull out of those very easily, because they're huge international collaborative programs. And if the budgets for those go up, you have to find the funds. And what's left over is the money which goes into funding basic research in our universities; and that's the bit that's going to be absolutely hammered as a result of these proposals.

**James Naughtie:** Well, the new Science Minister is Ian Pearson, the successor to Malcolm Wicks. What does he say about this?

**Phil Willis MP:** Well, I think, to be fair, Ian Pearson has been left with a major problem. I mean, he rightly says 'look, we're putting 17 per cent more into science over the next three years, which is really good news; we're putting 13.5 per cent more into this particular area; and yet we've got these problems, largely as a result - so we understand - of an overrun on the Diamond light source at Didcot. Now, my committee's going to examine all this in... early in January to see who is responsible, where the fault lies, and indeed what can be done to save physics and particle physics in the UK.

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**James Naughtie:** How does the Government square the fundamental contradiction that you pointed out at the beginning between what its promises are in terms of research and development in physics, and a cut of a quarter?

**Phil Willis MP:** Well, I think it's important to actually say that this Government has doubled a funding for research science over the last... particularly the last eight years. And what it does do - quite rightly, in my view - is to say to the research community - the research councils - 'look, we allocate the resources, and we're allocating more money. It's up to you to actually divide it up appropriately.' But somewhere between those two, actually allocating the money, getting the biz for new money, there has been clearly an error. And that error, you know, is either on the behalf of the new Science and Technology Facilities Council, or it's on behalf of Government ministers who haven't listened to the case. We don't know that answer yet, but it's important that we preserve this crucial area of science.

**James Naughtie:** What about the business of the project - the International Linear Collider - that has, really, had it, it appears, as a result of this decision?

**Phil Willis MP:** Well, quite frankly, if that is the case, then Britain is really, sort of, pulling out of astrophysics in a very, very big way. We have been part of the... the CERN projects have been international... massive international collaborations; the collider, which comes onstream early next year, is actually looking at, really, sort of, the origins of the Earth - you know, what happened to the Big Bang; it's looking at the relationship between the Earth and the rest of the planetary system. It's crucially important in science that we actually understand that. And to say that Britain's going to pull out altogether of the next major project I think sends the wrong signals out to the rest of the science world.

**James Naughtie:** Phil Willis, thank you