

# bioFocus

**Mark Downs** reports on the Voice of the Future 2013 event



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**H**olding policymakers, particularly parliamentarians and the Government, to account is integral to any democratic society. We all like to think that there is the opportunity to change thinking and, particularly from the perspective of a scientist, to ensure that policies are based on evidence. Of course, as we all know, accountability is often variable and not as effective as it might be. Information is often imperfect and voters are sometimes unsure as to the best way to influence a debate.

The science community needs to ensure that accurate information is available and that it is presented in a way which is helpful to our elected representatives. There are many initiatives to try to ensure this happens and a clear willingness from biologists to play their part. Science communication has become an integral part of any scientific training. There is plenty of room for improvement, but I think the media appetite for science and the political willingness to engage in science and evidence is encouraging. However, no matter how good the evidence is, or how strong the arguments are, they are of little value unless politicians know where to turn to and what the community thinks about key policy debates.

Many organizations are working hard to address this and the Society of Biology and our member organizations are now, thankfully, the starting point for debate on many occasions. But it is difficult to represent the views of the diverse landscape of biology across members of all ages and backgrounds working in very different areas. And, it is probably in the area of representing early career scientists where we have been least focused in ensuring politicians understand their views and concerns. To try to redress that, the Society of Biology ran a unique event for the first time last year when we turned the tables on the Science and Technology Select Committee and gave young members from across our organizations the opportunity to quiz politicians directly. None of us were sure how well this would be received and the witnesses who we proposed were inevitably nervous about the way in which the event may have turned out. In the end, it was a huge success, so much so that this year we have been able to run it again, learning from our experience of last year.

Our "Voice of the Future 2013" event took place on 20 March, when members of the Science and Technology Select Committee, the Minister for Science and Universities, the Shadow Science Minister and the Chief Scientific Adviser agreed to be quizzed by a new selection of early career scientists.

As a member organization who contributes to the funding of the pan-science work Dr Stephen Benn, here at the Society of Biology, carries out in Parliament, SfAM was able to benefit from close involvement and a dedicated allocation of places for

members to bid for. We were delighted to see Sabrina Roberts, Christiana Adesanwo, Joanna Kronka, Cassie Olateju and Emmanuel Adukwu participate, each with the opportunity to ask a question of their choosing and, even better, to be able to engage a very wide audience through the BBC's live broadcast of the event. If you would like to see this or look in more detail at the questions asked, please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/c52joy8> or <http://www.societyofbiology.org/newsandevents/news/view/533>.

Horsemeat in the food chain, the challenge of climate change, openness and transparency in Government advice and, from an SfAM perspective, the challenge of developing new antibiotics, were just some of the questions raised by the early career scientists. The Rt Hon David Willetts MP was put on the spot about the Government's approach to funding research and tuition fees, spending some time explaining why he felt the situation in the UK was just as good, if not better, than many of our competitors: listen to the answer to make up your own mind!

As well as direct dialogue between the three rotating groups of young scientists who took turns to ask their questions, there was also a significant interaction from around the UK and indeed further afield through social media, with many followers commenting through forums such as Twitter. This element of the day is captured in Storify: <http://tinyurl.com/cn826u6>.

There is no-one-size-fits all solution to ensuring everybody is engaged effectively in policy debates and ensuring accountability. Nonetheless, unique events such as this can make a useful contribution to raising the profile of science, demonstrating the range and types of scientist in professional bodies, and in the push for more evidence-based policymaking. It also provides, for many of the attendees, a first taste of the parliamentary process and how to get involved.

It was a good event for Parliament too and it is important that we recognize the willingness of our representatives to engage in these issues. For so many busy people, including the Speaker of the House, to give up time on budget day bodes well for the future as a positive reflection on our parliamentary system at a time when it is often criticized. After all, who could imagine the Congress in the United States offering to be quizzed live on television by groups of young American scientists in their own backyard?

**P** I found the Voice of the Future event to be a valuable experience which I both enjoyed and learnt from. It was a great way to interact with the MPs responsible for setting scientific policies as well as interacting with other young scientists from a wide variety of backgrounds. I found that a lot of topics, such as the small number of women in science, were common themes throughout different parts of the country as well as many different disciplines.

*Cassie Olateju*

**P** I found the event very informative and a good channel for dialogue between the scientific community and policymakers. It was also important that the young and early career scientists put forward their concerns regarding topics such as careers and employability, women in science, immigration, and other pressing scientific issues before the Minister and MPs. This was indeed an enjoyable event which offered great networking opportunities.

*Emmanuel Adukwu*

**P** A fantastic day at the House of Commons that spurred my interest in science policy. The highlight for me was getting the opportunity to ask Sir John Beddington a question.

*Sabrina Roberts*



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