

Edited by Colin Macilwain  
 news@ResearchResearch.com  
 Tel: 020 7216 6505  
 Fax: 020 7216 6501  
 Unit 111, 134-146 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3AR

# A place at the table

Much attention has been lavished on the reintroduction of Peter Mandelson into Gordon Brown's cabinet (*see view, page 19*). As well as adding some much-needed colour, it reflects Brown's determination to get back on track before the next election. The same can be said of Brown's choice of science minister, Paul Drayson, a racing car driver and biotechnology entrepreneur.

Drayson's appointment could be seen as a step back to David Sainsbury, a charismatic and wealthy science minister whose place at the table had been assured not merely by his serene wisdom, but also by his donation of large amounts of money to the Labour Party.

Rather than dwell on inconvenient details, such as the circumstances in which Drayson received his 2004 peerage, however, most research advocates will warmly welcome his appointment. They will look forward to the prospect of a science minister who is clearly equipped to become a visible and voluble advocate for science, whose very career personifies the exciting ways in which research can stimulate innovation.

They will further welcome the fact that Drayson, unlike his predecessor Ian Pearson, is to hold cabinet rank. He will even sit on the National Economic Committee, the new inner cabinet (did someone say Politburo?) that the Prime Minister has assembled to power Great Britain out of its current, reprobate condition. Research and innovation will, in fact, be well-represented on this 17-member committee, with Ed Miliband (energy), John Denham (DIUS), Stephen Carter (telecoms) as well as Mandelson and Drayson, likely to fly the flag for science and technology as underpinning economic progress.

Brown, at least, has held that view for 20 years—even as he presided over an economic boom, now expired, that was built primarily on speculative financial activity in the City of London. Now it falls on this group to show how any long-term recovery must be based on 'real' sectors of the economy—backed by science, technology and innovation.

## Last chance saloon

Bill Wakeham's review of British physics finds the discipline in reasonably rude health, and challenges it to take some corrective actions to ensure its continued strength and relevance.

What it does not suggest is any fundamental change in the arrangement that led to the review in the first place: the Science and Technology Facilities Council's mishandling of its responsibilities for physics and astronomy in the run-up to last year's Comprehensive Spending Review.

The STFC combines responsibility for the grant funding of these two disciplines with support for facilities used by all of Britain's scientists. The weakness of its support for the two disciplines has led to the loss of the confidence of large parts of the community it is supposed to sustain.

The Wakeham review wasn't directly asked to fix the STFC's ills: yet another review, led by David Grant of the University of Cardiff, is supposed to do that. But the real test will be next year's CSR. If it mishandles its budget negotiations again, the STFC's days, in its current form, are surely numbered. *See news, page 4, and views, pages 16, 17.*

## elsewhere

**"This is one of the reasons you fly such spacecraft."**

*Javier Benedicto*, project manager of the Galileo satellite navigation system, says the Giove-B test satellite is performing well after spending two weeks offline to investigate an anomaly. BBC News Online, 2/10/08.

**"We are running out of time. We are staring down the barrel of a gun."**

*Paul Smith*, head of Kew's Millennium Seed Bank, says unless the seed bank raises £100 million by the end of next year, it could be forced to close. The Times, 3/10/08.

**"We believe this to be the next generation of diagnostic testing. We can now detect almost any analyte faster, cheaper and more easily than the current accepted testing methodology."**

*Paul Millner*, biologist at the University of Leeds, has developed a hand-held device that can test for serious diseases such as cancer and multiple sclerosis from a tiny blood or urine sample in 15 minutes. The Daily Telegraph, 1/10/08.

**"There is no statutory basis to refuse to grant a patent on the basis that the scientific data in a patent application is a misrepresentation or fraudulently obtained."**

*David Johnson*, acting commissioner of patents at IP Australia, says Australia will likely grant a patent for Woo-Suk Hwang's cloning method, even though the Korean scientist lied about using it to create human embryonic stem cells. Nature, 1/10/08.

**"The important thing is that the lynx could be here ecologically, and the only reasons it's not are political and social."**

*Roy Dennis*, a wildlife consultant, bemoans the red tape that stifles the reintroduction of 'missing species' to Scotland. The Observer, 28/9/08.

## decade

**"There is little evidence to assess improvements in the terms and conditions of contract researchers, though higher education institutions suggest these have been made."**

The Research Careers Initiative says it is encouraged by progress on the concordat on research careers, but can find little evidence of improved conditions for researchers.

*Research Fortnight*, 14 October 1998