

Has British Science been Saved?

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Save British Science, the pressure group whose aim is to improve the scientific health of the UK, has just changed its name. We are now calling ourselves the Campaign for Science and Engineering, though a formal change will occur only if it is agreed at our next AGM.

As you can imagine, there has been quite a lot of comment about this. Above all, many people have been asking us whether we now think that British science really has been saved. And, if it has, do we still need an organisation like SBS – or CaSE as we now have to get used to saying?

The answer to both questions is “yes”, though, as a philosopher might put it, a lot depends on what you mean by the word “saved”. SBS was founded in 1985 at a time when things were very bad for science in the UK. Basic science funding had been declining for many years, with an estimated deficit of 19 per cent for 1984-5 compared with 1977-8. And this at a time when we were enjoying large revenues from North Sea oil, an industry based on the application of basic science, and when other countries were increasing their expenditure on science and engineering.

In desperation, a small group of scientists decided to place an ad in the *Times*, putting the case for more funding for science. This led to an invitation from Sir Keith Joseph (as he then was), the Secretary of State for Education and Science. Sir Keith politely explained that scientists had to understand that the UK was not a wealthy country and couldn't afford more funding for

science until we were better off. Like many others in positions of power and influence at that time, he did not see expenditure on science as an investment that would make a major contribution to the economy.

It was clear that there was a lot to be done if British science was to be saved, and so SBS turned itself into a permanent pressure group with Joe Lamb, John Mulvey and Denis Noble as the key players. Gradually, things started to improve, and while there were obviously many reasons for this, observers agree that SBS played a significant part. The first clear sign that things were changing was the appointment in 1992 of William (now Lord) Waldegrave as the first Minister of Science for 30 years. The decline in science funding slowed, and then was sharply reversed in the Comprehensive Spending Reviews following the election of the present Government in 1997.

Things are a lot different now from what they were when SBS began. Science funding has been greatly increased, and science and engineering now have a much higher profile both within government and beyond: in the media, for example. Their importance to the economy is widely recognised, and we cannot imagine any future government, of whatever political persuasion, returning to the policies of the 80s. So we can indeed say that British science has been saved.

But being saved and being in robust health are not the same thing. Serious problems remain, some on account of the years of neglect, and some with deeper roots. For the

recent general election we produced a document entitled *Science Policy Agenda: 2005-2010*. It ends with a long list of recommendations, backed up by detailed evidence from the UK and abroad. Clearly, there is still a lot for CaSE to do.

Finally, what about the name? To be honest, we'd grown attached to it over the years, and it also had gained wide recognition: when we mentioned SBS we didn't have to explain what we meant. So we weren't at all keen to change.

But people kept asking us when we were going to, and eventually we realised that the name had some real disadvantages. It made British scientists appear ungrateful, as if they hadn't noticed all that has been done to improve the situation. And while our friends understood how SBS had evolved, it was giving the wrong impression to people who knew us less well. We sounded as if we were still trying to fight the battles of the 1980s, instead of facing the challenges of the new century.

That's why we decided the time had come to change the name. CaSE doesn't have the associations of SBS and it will take a while for people to get to recognise it. But it describes more accurately what we are now and what we are doing. The original aim of SBS was to catch the attention of government. Now that's been done, our task is to make the most of the opportunity on behalf of British scientists – and the UK as a whole.

Copies of *Science Policy Agenda: 2005-2010* are available free of charge from CaSE, 29 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9QU.