

U.K. GENERAL ELECTION

Tax Fears Squeeze Out Spending Pledges

LONDON—With less than 2 weeks to go before the U.K. general election, all the opinion polls are tipping Labour to topple the Conservatives, who have been in power for almost 2 decades. Taxation has been one of the central issues in the 6-week campaign, with the two main parties vying to offer the least burdensome tax system. As a result, pledges for increased spending on research have been few. But Labour has been trying to win scientists' votes by promising to bolster flagging morale and to put science and technology closer to the heart of government policy. "Labour will celebrate science and scientists and all those who work at the cutting edge of technology," says Adam Ingram, the party's science spokesperson.

Science's fortunes under the Conservatives have been mixed. Critics point out that overall government R&D spending has declined, and although funds for basic research have increased modestly, they have not kept pace with increasing costs. The Conservative government has privatized more than 10 government laboratories and has subjected all of them to a rolling program of reviews. These reviews failed to reach a conclusion for many labs, causing great uncertainty for their staff (*Science*, 13 December 1996, p. 1831).

But since their last election victory in 1992, the Conservatives have portrayed themselves as champions of science. The government upped the status of science minister to Cabinet level and created a new Office of Science and Technology (OST) within the Cabinet Office. It also launched a huge consultation exercise in 1993 called technology foresight, which garnered the views of more than 10,000 academic and industrial scientists and research managers to identify and boost priority areas of research (*Science*, 12 May 1995, p. 795).

Such a high profile for science did not last, however. In a surprise move last year, the OST was shunted into the Department of Trade and Industry, and science's voice in the Cabinet weakened. In spite of these setbacks, science minister Ian Taylor believes the overall effect has been positive. "We now

have one of the world's most impressive and efficient research systems," he says.

In contrast to the Conservatives' tentative policies on science, their overhaul of higher education has been dramatic. Prior to 1992, Britain had one of the world's most exclusive university systems, with only about 14% of high school students going on to



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university. Since then, numerous polytechnic colleges have been transformed into universities, boosting the total from 55 to more than 100 and raising new questions about the place and funding of academic research in an era of low-cost, mass higher education.

The Labour Party is promising to reverse some of the Conservative changes, starting with the lab reviews. The laboratories are a "major national resource and a source of crucial research expertise," says Ingram, who promises to halt the reviews if Labour wins. A Labour government would also review the rolling foresight exercise, he adds. "Academics have put in a lot of effort, but there are signs industry in some sectors is becoming cooler," says Ingram. Labour has also promised to strengthen the post of chief scientific adviser, currently held by Sir Robert May, but it makes no commitment to restore the OST to its former position in the Cabinet Office.

However, there may be support within the party to elevate the political status of science: Of more than 400 prospective election candidates who responded to a survey for the Association of University Teachers, 75% of Labour and Liberal Democrat respondents supported the creation of a Cabinet-

level minister for science and research. Only 38% of Conservative candidates were in favor. Ingram cautions that "another process of rapid change would not necessarily be in the best interests of the scientific community. We would need to review the new arrangement in government."

As for research funding, Labour has remained almost silent to avoid stoking fears of higher taxes—an issue that Labour believes lost it the 1992 election. "We're not making funding commitments in any area before the general election. Promises would be the wrong approach," says Ingram. But Labour this week announced a new scheme to help sponsor young scientific and artistic talent. Part of the income from the National Lottery, a lucrative Conservative innovation that generates \$2 billion for "good causes" each year, would be used to create a fund called the National Endowment for Science, Technology, and the Arts.

In contrast to the Labour and Conservative Parties, the Liberal Democrats—Britain's third largest national party, with an 18% share of the vote at the last election—is promising to raise taxes to fund an improved education system. The Liberal Democrats have also promised to shift \$240 million into civil research from the military research budget, which has been shrinking since the end of the Cold War. "It's quite clear we are not producing enough scientists throughout the system," says science spokesperson, Nigel Jones. "We're seeing the start of a new brain drain."

The parties have said little about their plans for higher education, but in this case they are not just being cautious. The explosion in university places prompted the government to order a major inquiry into the entire system, which will also recommend how teaching and academic research should best be organized and funded. The inquiry, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, is not due to report until the summer. "Science has a fragile academic base, but we would want to await the outcome of the Dearing inquiry. If we are in government, I hope we could then move very quickly," says Ingram. Taylor agrees: "The Dearing conclusions will be very important for future policy."

The low profile for science in this election campaign and the lack of commitment from the major parties to increase funding for science and technology have drawn fire from the lobby group Save British Science. "This neglect of the foundations of our future health, wealth, and employment in an increasingly competitive age of science-based technological revolution is alarming," the group says in a statement.

—Nigel Williams

For statements from the three major parties on policies for young scientists, see *Science's Next Wave* at www.nextwave.org