



House of Commons
Innovation, Universities,
Science and Skills Committee

The future of science scrutiny following the merger of DIUS and BERR

Fourth Special Report of Session 2008–09

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The Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee

The Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

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The Committee is one of the departmental Select Committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No.152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/ius
A list of reports from the Committee in this Parliament is included at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Sarah Davies (Clerk); Glenn McKee (Second Clerk); Dr Christopher Tyler (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Senior Committee Assistant); Camilla Brace (Committee Assistant); Anna Browning (Committee Assistant); Jim Hudson (Committee Support Assistant); and Becky Jones (Media Officer).

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Fourth Special Report: The future of science scrutiny following the merger of DIUS and BERR

Introduction

1. On 5 June a Cabinet reshuffle resulted in a Machinery of Government change: the merger of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), to create a new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills under the leadership of Lord Mandelson.¹

2. Select Committees established under Standing Order No. 152 mirror the structure of government departments. We therefore expect that the Leader of the House will shortly bring forward changes to that Standing Order to establish a single Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, and our Committee (the IUSS Committee) and the Business and Enterprise Committee will cease to exist. Taking this into account we intend to bring our business to a close as soon as is practicable with the publication of three major reports (on *Students and Universities*, *Putting Science and Engineering at the Heart of Government Policy* and *Capital Expenditure in Further Education Colleges*) and the outcome of oral evidence sessions on other topics.

The need for cross-government science scrutiny

3. We firmly believe that the opportunity should be taken to revisit the need for a separate science scrutiny committee. When the IUSS Committee was established following the Machinery of Government changes in 2007 it supplanted the Science and Technology Committee in the face of opposition from members of that Committee and the scientific community. The Science and Technology Committee's *Last Report* noted the legacy of dedicated science scrutiny within the House:

The House of Commons first established a Science and Technology Select Committee in 1966 in order 'to consider science and technology and report thereon'. This Committee existed for the duration of the 1966–1971 Parliament and was re-appointed in 1971 and 1974. The Committee was abolished in 1979 when the departmental select committee structure was established. A similar Committee, with a remit more closely mirroring that of a departmental committee, was established in July 1992 and has remained ever since. The current Science and Technology Committee was appointed on 19 July 2005.²

And concluded:

Given the Government's focus on evidence-based policy-making and the wide consensus on the value of science in our society, we believe that this would be the wrong time to downgrade or reduce the scrutiny of cross-cutting science issues within Parliament. The strong view amongst the science community is that such

¹ "New Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to lead fight against recession and build now for future prosperity", 10 Downing Street Press Notice, 5 June 2009

² Science and Technology Committee, Thirteenth Report of Session 2006-07, *The Last Report*, HC 1108, para 1

scrutiny is best carried out by a select committee with a clear identity and a clear mission. Given the House's decision to replace the Science and Technology Committee with a departmental select committee, we hope that the new Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee will have the authority to work across Government rather than within the narrow confines of a single department. We believe that in the long term a separate Science and Technology Committee is the only way to guarantee a permanent focus on science across Government within the select committee system. We recommend that the House be given an opportunity to revisit the question of science scrutiny in the Commons at the end of session 2007–08.³

4. Some measures were taken to meet these concerns. We were established with 14 members rather than the more usual 11, and following our representations to the Government the House of Commons agreed on 11 March 2008 to change the name of the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee to include the word “science” in the title.⁴ The issue was raised of whether we should have a dedicated sub-committee, as noted in our *Work of the Committee in 2007–08* Report:

The Leader of the House, Harriet Harman MP, commented that ‘If the Committee chooses to have a Sub-Committee covering science and technology issues, it will be able to operate that Sub-Committee, in effect, as a successor to the current Science and Technology Committee.’⁵

5. We commented “We chose, on balance, not to appoint a standing Sub-Committee on Science and Technology because we thought that this could be seen as downgrading our science scrutiny role. Instead we have made frequent use of subcommittees to conduct inquiries on a variety of subjects.”⁶

The experience of the IUSS Committee

6. Notwithstanding these measures, experience has proved our concerns about overall workload well-founded. Despite the dedication of our core membership—we were the third most frequently meeting Committee in the 2007–08 session⁷—it has proved difficult to balance the scrutiny of the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills with the demands of examining the use of science across government.

7. Looking forward, attempting to do this same balancing act with an even larger department which also covers business, enterprise and regulation will prove impossible for the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee.

8. And there could not be a worse time to reduce scrutiny of science and engineering. We have been told repeatedly during the last 12 months that exploitation of the UK's science

³ Science and Technology Committee, Thirteenth Report of Session 2006–07, *The Last Report*, HC 1108, para 38

⁴ *Votes and Proceedings*, 11 March 2008

⁵ HC Deb, 25 July 2007, col 942

⁶ Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, Second Report of Session 2008–09, *The work of the Committee in 2007–08*, HC 49, para 6

⁷ Liaison Committee, First Report of Session 2008–09, *The work of committees in 2007–08*, HC 291, para 121

base could be the route for recovery for the UK economy. On 10 June, speaking at the Science Museum, Lord Mandelson said “The future competitiveness of this country depends on the excellence of its science [...] our ability to maintain and develop our strong science base through both applied and a substantial element of fundamental curiosity-driven research, will be essential to our long-term economic success.”⁸ But rather than take the opportunity to move the Government Office for Science to the Cabinet Office, as we have recommended in the past,⁹ and give science a stable home at the heart of government policy, it seems to have been treated as a bargaining chip passed around departments. The fact that DIUS has been moved wholesale into a new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, with only a part-time Minister for Science and Innovation, means that vigilance is needed to ensure that basic science is not neglected among the administrative changes. Nor should science spending and policy be subordinated to the short-term needs of industry and business.

Conclusion

9. As Lord Rees of Ludlow, President of the Royal Society, Lord Browne of Madingley, President of the Royal Academy of Engineering, Professor Sir Mark Walport, Director of the Wellcome Trust, Professor Colin Blakemore, then Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council, and 34 eminent members of the scientific and engineering community put it in 2007, Science needs its Select Committee.

10. We call on the Leader of the House to propose the creation of a Science and Technology Committee alongside the new Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. We urge the Leader of the House to bring forward the necessary Standing Order changes and let the House decide the matter.

⁸ “Mandelson says new department will put science at centre of vision of Britain's future prosperity”, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills press notice, 10 June 2009

⁹ Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2008–09, *Engineering: turning ideas into reality*, HC 50-I, para 311

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2008–09

First Report	Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch, implementing skills and training policies	HC 48–I (HC 365)
Second Report	The Work of the Committee 2007–08	HC 49
Third Report	DIUS's Departmental Report 2008	HC 51–I (HC 383)
Fourth Report	Engineering: turning ideas into reality	HC 50–I
Fifth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Economic and Social Research Council, Dr Alan Gillespie CBE	HC 505
Sixth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Professor Sir Tom Blundell	HC 506

Session 2007–08

First Report	UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation	HC 185 (HC 459)
Second Report	The work and operation of the Copyright Tribunal	HC 245 (HC 637)
Third Report	Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs)	HC 187–I (HC 638)
Fourth Report	Science Budget Allocations	HC 215 (HC 639)
Fifth Report	Renewable electricity-generation technologies	HC 216–I (HC 1063)
Sixth Report	Biosecurity in UK research laboratories	HC 360–I (HC 1111)
Seventh Report	Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the Draft Apprenticeships Bill	HC 1062–I (HC (2008–09)262)
First Special Report	The Funding of Science and Discovery Centres: Government Response to the Eleventh Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 214
Second Special Report	The Last Report: Government Response to the Thirteenth Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 244
Fourth Special Report	Investigating the Oceans: Government Response to the Science and Technology Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 506 [incorporating HC 469–i]