

Week in Westminster 2012

As part of the Royal Society Pairing Scheme, Senior Lecturer in Cancer Sciences [Dr Jo Parish](#)

(<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/cancer/parish-jo.aspx>) from the University will spend a week in Westminster gaining an insight into the life of an MP. Dr Parish has been paired with [Gisela Stuart](http://www.giselastuartmp.co.uk/) (<http://www.giselastuartmp.co.uk/>), MP for Birmingham Edgbaston.

“ Gisela Stuart, MP for Birmingham Edgbaston "I'm keen to support schemes which bring together researchers and policy makers. If politicians don't understand the needs of universities and those who work in them, they won't be able to make good decisions. New technologies will provide the jobs we need."**”**

Dr Parish will be providing regular updates regarding her week in Westminster on this blog page.

Week in Westminster WITH DR JO PARISH



Reflections on the week - Friday 2 November 2012

This week has been such an eye opener! It has been absolutely fascinating to spend this week in Westminster and to learn about the impact that science has on government policy.

While I'm certainly not convinced that politicians get every decision right, I am at least comforted in the knowledge that the select committees make significant efforts to make sure they have a strong evidence base before making decisions. The select committee meetings that I was able to attend were rigorous in their questioning of the experts they had called to provide evidence. I have now seen this in practice; one of the science and technology select committee meetings I attended was hearing evidence from the directors of the British Antarctic Survey and the National Oceanography Centre. The members of the committee left no stone unturned and I left the meeting feeling that the planned merger was not as straightforward as the media had led me to believe. The following day I heard on the news that the merger had been scrapped. It was great to feel that I had witnessed the underpinning of this decision and that the panel had advised the government in the same way I would have done with the information provided.

What still worries me is how little impact researchers like me have on the decisions made within parliament. I am still not sure whether Ministers and policy makers really understand what academic science really means and the impact that academic researchers have on our society's economy and well-being. I think all academics need to engage with their MPs to highlight the importance of University led research. I also think that the majority of MPs (certainly all of those I met) would appreciate learning more. I fully intend to engage more in the future. I now realise how influential the Royal Society is within parliament and plan to use this as a route to try and make a difference.

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I've very much enjoyed my week in Westminster; it has been a very positive experience both professionally and personally. I met several very famous and iconic politicians and have some funny and interesting stories to tell my family, friends and colleagues. I am amazed by how hard MPs work and I found the fast-paced environment motivating. However, the long hours and constant social engagement left me drained by the end of the week (and in total admiration of Gisela!). Aside from the debates, select committee meetings, social and media engagement, writing, researching and editing, Gisela receives over 300 emails a day from constituents, which she tries to answer personally. I am in awe of her commitment to her constituency and very grateful that she took time out of her very busy schedule to educate me about the inner workings of our government. I am very much looking forward to the reciprocal visit and teaching Gisela some new skills in molecular biology!

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Behind the scenes - Thursday 1 November 2012

Now I know the meaning of the term 'media circus'! Following last night's vote in the House of Commons on the EU budget, there was a lot of hype in the media. The vote went against the coalition, which happens very infrequently, and the newspapers and TV were buzzing

with speculation.

I met Gisela at the BBC studios at Millbank to observe as she gave interview after interview to various regional and national radio stations. I was amazed by Gisela's ability to keep the incessant questioning focused. She always made sure that she understood the questions appropriately and that she didn't veer away from the subject in hand with her answers. She stood her ground and did not allow others to put words in her mouth. After the radio broadcasts, Gisela went on to appear in a televised debate filmed for the BBC's Week in Parliament programme. Watching this behind the scenes was fascinating. I was invited to sit in the studio as it was filmed to observe the producers operating the cameras during the debate.

Today I also got a first hand taster of the sort of tasks that MP's researchers perform. Gisela was invited to write an introduction for a book about poverty in the UK and how to solve some of the issues that are pertinent to today's society. Gisela asked me to find some facts and figures to contribute to the piece and therefore I had to read through a publication detailing the changes to household incomes and expenditure of the last financial year. It goes without saying that this was far removed from the research I conduct normally, but nonetheless I appreciated the challenge!

Later on in the day, Gisela invited me to join her at a reception in the BBC studios at Bush House. This was a launch for the BBC Radio 4's Alistair Cooke project to archive his iconic 'Letter From America' series. I had heard of Alistair Cooke's works before, but I am now spurred on to listen to them all – what an iconic voice! It will be interesting to see how America has changed since the Letters were first broadcast and how various aspects are viewed in the eyes of the British.

Week in Westminster WITH DR JO PARISH



PMQs - Wednesday 31 October 2012

This morning began with a presentation by Sir John Beddington, Government Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA). This was an inspiring session. Sir John was an up-beat character and explained his role as GCSA really effectively. He was extremely personable but

commanded respect – the type of person that can listen to all sides of an argument carefully then be able to make his own decision and stand by it.

I then made my way to Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the House of Commons. I knew that debates within the House of Commons can be loud, but two things really shocked me. Firstly the Commons Chamber is remarkably small – the opposing sides are much closer to each other than the images on the TV would suggest. Secondly, the volume of the heckling and seemingly chaotic speed at which the questions were asked and answered was startling! It was like being in a very crowded room with numerous conversations going at once. At times, the MP with the floor could not be heard above the noise of those heckling. I am amazed that this is the way our government debates the most important issues. Scientists are far more civilized!!! It was great fun to watch!

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That evening I was invited to attend a briefing dinner with the Fleet Commander and Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sir George Zambellas. Between courses, the Admiral delivered a speech describing the current state of the Naval fleet and plans for the future. This was fascinating. It was a reasonably informal setting and that such important information was delivered to Ministers and MPs in this manner was, on the surface, bizarre. However, I quickly realised that this was a great way to gauge opinions from both sides of the fence. After the main course, there was a Q and A session and in the absence of an official record the questions asked of the Admiral were probably more probing than would otherwise have been. I am told that Ministers spend a lot of time taking the temperature of a given situation and I feel this was essentially the point of the dinner.

Week in Westminster WITH DR JO PARISH



Science in government - Tuesday 30 October 2012

This morning began with a series of seminars that were designed to provide a whistle-stop tour of science in government and the role of civil servants. This was not as fast paced as the sessions in the previous morning but nonetheless, provided a useful insight into how

various committees and departments put together the information required to inform decision makers.

In breakout groups we were asked to play the role of either an expert as part of a scientific advice group for emergencies (SAGE) or a minister that needs timely information to inform important decisions. I was part of the 'experts' panel and using the Fukushima nuclear disaster as an example we were to think of the questions that the ministers might be asking and from what sources we would find the appropriate information. What was interesting to me that this is the process that goes on before a cabinet office briefing room meeting (COBR) and the experts become very good at preempting the questions that the ministers are likely to ask. This is very much a proactive process, rather than the experts providing information in response mode as I had assumed.

Following this session, we were treated to a seminar entitled 'impacts from research'. In a way I very much admire the speaker for this session because she was faced with a group of scientists that became very grumpy very quickly! That said, what was most frustrating to me was that following the talk the scientists were all bursting to ask questions and offer their opinions. This turned into a lively debate but I was very much left with the impression that we were firing at a brick wall. We were even told that 'none of our questions were new to them', but why then have they not been heard? I really don't think that the policy makers involved are sufficiently aware of the impact (excuse the pun) that REF is having on academic research.

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For lunch I joined Gisela in the House of Commons cafeteria. This is a bustling place that has a wonderful atmosphere. We found a quiet corner where it was nice to have a one-on-one chat with Gisela. We talked a bit about the impact of science on policy, and policy on science. I can't remember why but we started talking about the infamous Wakefield study and its impact on MMR uptake. It was interesting to revisit this age-old debate with someone who is not a scientist, but has seen the impact of the study from the political rather than scientific side. I think Gisela was genuinely surprised at the extent of the ethical and scientific flaws within this study and I vowed to send her a copy!

Later I sat in on the Select Committee for Defense meeting where we heard evidence on Afghanistan and plans for military withdrawal. This was a very interesting session and I now realize more that the select committees go to greater lengths than I had originally thought to try and ensure that they have all the facts before going ahead with any decisions. The questioning of the witnesses in attendance was rigorous, and it was very interesting to see that the MPs were questioning with an obvious agenda, without biasing the answers given by the witnesses.

Week in Westminster WITH DR JO PARISH



Important interactions - Monday 29 October 2012

This morning we met at the Palace of Westminster and were treated to a tour of the Palace. The tradition and history seeped into the proceedings of both Houses was amazing. Our tour guide was a font of knowledge and we took full advantage! We toured both houses

(which are surprisingly small) and various chambers and halls within the Palace.

We then gathered for several seminars aimed at introducing the various committees that have been established within Parliament to offer scientific advice and write policies that are put forward to shape legislation. A lot of resources are available to MPs through the Science and Technology Select Committees, House of Commons Library and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). However, it seems to me that the speed at which some of the evidence is put together to inform decision makers means that it is not always factually correct and balanced. The MPs and staff that sit on these committees do an amazing job, but I couldn't help but feel that the pressure to make a rapid response sometimes leaves scientific evidence behind. I am left wondering how the scientific community can help with this process and ensure that reports are generated that provide a balanced evidence-based overview at the speed that is so often required.

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Later in the afternoon, I met with my MP pair, Gisela Stuart for coffee. Gisela works exceptionally hard and never seems to switch off from parliamentary issues. She is a very stimulating person to talk to; she always gives her honest opinion in my experience and then goes on to provide facts and figures that support those opinions. I can't wait to see her in action in a real parliamentary debate. Just this morning, Gisela publicly offered her opinion on a contentious issue within Parliament and it was very interesting to see some of the after effects. As with science, many of the important interactions between politicians that I witnessed today happened in the cafeteria and it was great to be able to see this play out in front of me. All of the MPs I saw in this hour or so were seemingly collegial! Not what I expected at all! I suppose it is that which is not said that you need to be mindful of, but it was really nice to see that those that supported Gisela were demonstrably supportive.

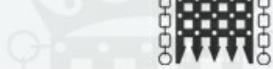
Week in Westminster



Stimulating and lively - Sunday 28 October 2012

WEEK IN WESTMINSTER

WITH DR JO PARISH



This evening we all arrived at the hotel and all of the scientists on the scheme met for dinner. As with all Royal Society events that I have attended, the conversation was stimulating and lively.

It is humbling to be sat at a table with scientists from such varied disciplines. From chemists to physicists and paleontologists to astronomers (and a virologist thrown into the mix!), the Royal Society never fails to put together an amazing group of scientists from across the UK, fuel them with a little wine and sit back while the conversations begin! We discussed so many topics, with an expert ever-present to provide factual insights into current research. I learnt about space missions and some of their specific priorities, some of the current theories on global warming and its potential impact on humankind, and debated how to engage young people in science, particularly the physical sciences. Such a great evening! It really set me up for the week.

Week in Westminster

WITH DR JO PARISH



Taking the opportunity - Wednesday 24 October 2012

I am really looking forward to my week in Westminster! I will spend the week shadowing Gisela Stuart MP as part of the Royal Society Pairing Scheme for Scientists and MPs.

I am very interested in how policies regarding human health and disease are adopted within parliament and how this shapes the way academic research is conducted within the UK. I will take the opportunity to talk to politicians to learn more about the decision making process. I hope that by engaging with policy makers within parliament, I will understand more about how the decisions they make shape the NHS, global human health and academic research. I also hope that the politicians I meet will learn from my experiences as an academic scientist and begin to understand how parliamentary decisions influence academic research. Read how I get on here...