

Week in Westminster

As part of the Royal Society Pairing Scheme, Biogeochemistry lecturer Dr Rebecca Bartlett from the University will spend a week in Westminster gaining an insight into the life of an MP. Dr Bartlett has been paired with Gisela Stuart, 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 Bartlett will be providing regular updates regarding her week in Westminster on this blog page.

Week in Westminster WITH DR REBECCA BARTLETT



Reflections on the week - Friday 5 November 8.34am

Yesterday was my last day...The Royal Society scheme has been an absolute joy both personally and professionally. It is rare that scientists from such a range of disciplines are brought together and this week we have been unified by our commitment to supporting

science excellence.

To be in Westminster at a time of such change following the Browne Report, the Comprehensive Spending Review and the statement on Tuition Fees, brought the connection between science and politics to life. We have had direct experience of how science and academia are perceived and dealt with by Westminster and this knowledge will stay with me in my work as a lecturer and a researcher.

The Royal Society have a clear presence in Westminster and I have been impressed by their involvement with policy makers. With spending cuts bringing the loss of many scientific advisory groups, Select Committees appear to be the forum for bringing science to policy makers and I am encouraged by the openness of the enquiry process to hear evidence from those with an interest. There are limitations - balancing the complexity and uncertainty of science with the need for numbers and thresholds to inform policy is difficult. Whether the government act on scientific evidence when implementing policy is uncertain and requires a consideration of finance and public opinion which may be in conflict with what the science shows. Despite these challenges, scientists can have an influence and engage with this process in a number of ways including proposing an area for enquiry, responding to Calls for Evidence and Library reports, and lobbying MPs - the MPs I have met have been keen to hear from scientists and this is an open door we should take advantage of.

This week has been both sobering and inspiring - seeing government in action, surrounded by social and political history and with a backdrop of some awesome views of London. I have had four days access to the Palace of Westminster, dining in Portcullis House, evening drinks in the River Room of the House of Lords, a lunchtime pint on the terrace of the Strangers Bar of the House of Commons... I have met some very distinguished characters and shaken some famous hands. I doubt I shall forget any of this week soon, and I have some priceless quotes and anecdotes for my friends in the pub.

Gisela has been a superb host and I am looking forward to returning the favour when she visits the University. I am considering a stint of biogeochemistry field work, which is likely to involve waders and large quantities of muddy water. My souvenir 'House of Commons' tea towel may come in handy, but for the time being I shall put it to good use at home, alongside a much loved 'Votes for Women' counterpart.

Week in Westminster WITH DR REBECCA BARTLETT



Politics in action - Wednesday 3 November 9.53pm

While our previous days in Westminster have been dominated by a discussion of science in Government and Parliament, today we observed real politics in action.

This morning we heard evidence from witnesses as part of a Science and Technology Select Committee Enquiry on Scientific Advice and Evidence in Emergencies. This was specifically addressing the volcanic ash cloud incident in spring with a focus on the preparedness of Government for such an event. There was a fascinating dynamic between representatives from science and industry and the MPs on the committee. The importance of science funding and interpretation of environmental data were amongst the discussions.

PMQs brought pomp and ceremony to the day with a lively discussion of David Cameron's photographer and David Willetts' statement on tuition fees. Tuition fees featured throughout the afternoon, with an informative debate on participation in higher education in Westminster Hall, led by David Lammy.

To top a thought provoking and exciting day, we were then given front row seats for a Royal Society and Royal Society for Literature lecture - A Problem Shared: Securing a Future for our Planet - Margaret Atwood in conversation with Sir Brian Hoskins CBE FRS chaired by Gabrielle Walker. It was a joy and a privilege to hear a reasoned and considered discussion of climate change, science, policy, education and human nature.

In the context of my experiences in Westminster these last few days I am reassured by characters such as Sir Brian Hoskins and Margaret Atwood who remind us all of our collective and individual responsibility to our global environment and the education of future generations.

Week in Westminster WITH DR REBECCA BARTLETT



PMQs - Wednesday 3 November 6.30am

Today, Gisela has organised a ticket for the Special Side Gallery of the House of Commons for Prime Minister's Questions.

I am interested to see democracy in action, especially at such an important time, following the Browne Report and Comprehensive Spending Review. How these financial changes impact on the future of science was a common theme in yesterday's meetings. All the academics here will be watching carefully.

At 12.30 today, there is to be a statement in the House on tuition fees. To hear something so crucial to my role as a lecturer read live in Parliament will be a unique experience - and in the Special Gallery I'll be able to hear all the MPs' reactions and comments, rather than the low grumbles you can hear on the radio or television....

Week in Westminster



Enquiring minds - Tuesday 2 November 12.20pm



Yesterday we were given insight into the challenges and limitations of bringing scientific evidence to Government; there is a system for reporting science to policy makers through the Civil Service, but there is no obligation for policy makers to act on that evidence.

Today we are discussing the mechanisms of science in Parliament and the role of the House of Commons Library and House of Commons and House of Lords Select Committees in bringing scientific evidence to Parliament, through Enquiries. These provide an opportunity for anyone to become involved, by recommending an Enquiry, or providing evidence for or acting as witness for an Enquiry. Again, there is no obligation for Parliament to act on the recommendations of an Enquiry, yet the process of Enquiry itself raises the profile of a given issue in Westminster and beyond, which may bring about changes. Look out for Calls for Evidence as you may have a valid contribution.

"Look out for Calls for Evidence as you may have a valid contribution."

This afternoon, I have been asked to take part in a mock Select Committee Evidence session, posing questions to expert witnesses on the Use of Science in Parliament. We will be hearing evidence from Sr Brian Iddon (scientist and former MP), Fiona Fox (Director, Science Media Centre), Dr Jack Stilgoe (Senior Policy Advisor, Royal Society) and hope to experience what Select Committee Enquiries are really like, before seeing the real thing later in the week.

Week in Westminster
WITH DR REBECCA BARTLETT



An eventful first day - Monday 1 November 8.35pm

10 minutes late on my first day at Westminster I found myself running past Downing Street on my way to Black Rod Gardens to collect my security pass. Not quite the approach to parliament that I had hoped for, and not the best photo on my pass, but it turned out to be a very

good day.

There are around 20 or so scientists from around the UK who are paired with either MPs or Civil Servants working in science as part of this scheme that the Royal Society have been running for 9 years now. We were given a warm welcome to the Pairing Scheme by Steven Cox of the Royal Society and an enlightening, and at times lively, Science in Government Seminar. The opening talk by Professor David Cope (Director of the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology), described a balance between science in its own right, which may be inspirational and educational, and science (and technology) with instrumental aims, which may lead to wealth and power. In fact, this was a common theme throughout the day which ended on a discussion with Graeme Reid (Department for Business Innovation and Skills) of the case for science funding and the importance of research impact to society. During the afternoon, John Beddington (Government Chief Scientific Advisor) discussed themes such as future climate change and increasing water demand in the context of understanding the levels of uncertainty in scientific research data and how best to reconcile this uncertainty with the need for clarity in science policy. This highlighted the importance of assuring a sound evidence base for scientific policy makers.

So a good first day at Westminster - Gisela tells me her worms are doing well and I am particularly pleased to have purchased a bottle of House of Commons Mineral Water, which I shall keep and use in my Geochemistry and Water Quality lectures back at the University to see if my students can determine the provenance of the water from its chemical constituents (along with other leading brands, of course)...

Week in Westminster
WITH DR REBECCA BARTLETT



Interesting time - Friday 29 October 2010



I am looking forward to next Monday... a week in Westminster shadowing Gisela Stuart MP as part of the Royal Society Pairing Scheme for Scientists and MPs.

This is an interesting time for an academic to visit parliament and I will take the opportunity to talk to the decision makers who are shaping the future science, academia and the environment. Whatever your politics, there is no doubting the importance of engaging with the political process and I hope this week will improve the connection between my scientific research and scientific policy and understanding. I have already introduced Gisela to the joys of wormery composting for her London flat... who knows what I'll manage in a week! Read how I get on here...