

JULIAN STURDY MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA



20 September 2010

Dear Ms Blundell,

Thank you for contacting me about government support for science, technology and engineering.

Over the next few weeks and months, major decisions will be made on government spending priorities as part of a wider move to stabilise our country's finances and rebalance the economy. They will help to define what we value as a nation and the direction that we wish to take. Investing in science and research is a critical part of that, and I would like to reassure you that this Government values the contribution of science research.

And, of course, innovation, the introduction of new or improved products, processes or methods, has been shown to be the key driver of economic growth in advanced economies. Our researchers, academics, private companies, universities and research institutes will undoubtedly have a major role to play in creating future economic growth and improving quality of life.

I do not believe that the only worthwhile measure of a government's support for science and technology is the amount of money it spends. It is right that we ask how budgets across the public sector – including the science research budget – can deliver more for less. Money is important both for quality and quantity, but it is an input, not an output, measure.

I also recognise that scientific enquiry has its own intrinsic merit. It is in the public good so it is also right that research and technical priorities are set at arm's length from government, and through peer review. But the Government currently spends £6 billion a year supporting science and research, so it is also right that consideration should be given to strategic priorities.

Nevertheless, I can assure you that the Government has no intention of simply slicing pieces off of the science budget here and there; nor do Ministers wish to politicise these decisions.

There is, however, a strong case for identifying broad problems – the challenges thrown up by an ageing population and environmental challenges, for instance. There is also a case for identifying and building up the areas where the UK truly is a world leader – stem cells and regenerative medicine, plastic electronics, satellite communications, fuel cells, advanced manufacturing, and composite materials to name just a few.

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That is why the Government preference is to ration research funding by excellence and back research teams of international quality – and screen out mediocrity – regardless of where they are and what they do. In the current economic climate, there is no justification for public money being used to support research which is neither commercially useful nor theoretically outstanding.

Ministers are also determined to maintain the UK's openness as a society and its attractiveness as a destination for the brightest scientists, researchers and engineers from all over the world. The Government recognises that such openness has reciprocal benefits – British researchers already have an excellent record of working across borders – and wants to break down barriers to collaboration, which is an important way for us to stay at the cutting edge of research whilst reducing the cost to the UK taxpayer.

And finally, although the UK has a strong record of transforming research into innovation, it is evident that we need to do more in this regard. This involves building stronger links between the UK's science and research base and the business community; creating more spin-out companies; and providing a magnet for attracting overseas investors to the UK.

This is the approach that underpins the Government's approach to science funding in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and it is one that I feel will deliver a stable framework for the science and research budget after the spending review is completed.

I do hope that this is useful, and thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

With kind regards

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Julian Sturdy'.