

Investment in science “will create jobs” – Today Programme 9 March 2010

Available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8557000/8557110.stm

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John Humphrys: It's not often you get ministers from opposing parties agreeing with each other on matters of national policy, not even former ministers, but Lord Sainsbury and Lord Waldegrave do agree about one thing: whatever else is cut from the public spending budget, we must not cut spending on scientific research. Both were science ministers, Sainsbury Labour, Waldegrave Tory, they're both on the line. Long time since you've been a science minister, indeed in government Lord Waldegrave. What's happened to spending research, spending on research since then – since what is it, 15 16 years?

Lord Waldegrave: Well it is a long time. Spending has been well protected by this government, at least until very recently, and I pay tribute to David Sainsbury personally for that. He built on the framework of policy that I was partly responsible for introducing back in '95 and around there, and we've had consistency of policy, with good funding, for long enough so that we are at last really beginning to see results, and science is a long term business; all that effort and investment would be in danger of being wasted if we turned it off now. We're beginning to see the results coming through. If only we can stick to consistent policy for a few more years, Britain's position at the top table of science and technology will really be secure.

JH: And Lord Sainsbury you believe that as well. Have you said as much to your present leaders?

Lord Sainsbury: Yes, I've been saying it, I said it for 8 years when I was a minister and I've been saying it consistently since then.

JH: But my point is really is it being cut now, in the way that Lord Waldegrave was suggesting?

S: Well there's been a cut in the university budget, not the science budget itself, research budget itself has been protected. Of course these two things are pretty much interlinked, so I think it's good that the research budget has been protected, but there is a danger that if you cut the university budget that has an effect on it.

JH: How do you, you said, Lord Waldegrave, that it was important that we remain, or we have a seat at, the “top table”. Why, apart from sort of prestige and a little bit of national pride? Why does it matter?

W: Well because we're not going to be able to compete with the outside world in terms of cheap labour costs and we would fail if we went that way. We can only succeed – and there's another very good report out today confirming this, alongside the Royal Society's report, from James Dyson – we are only going to succeed if we can add value and be in the higher-tech end of exports. There's another point: if you look, we did an experiment in the 80s and it was a bad experiment and it failed. We thought then that if you cut government funding for science well then the private sector would move in and fill the gap. That's not what happens. The private sector looks and says, "Now, are the, is this a country which is serious about its science and technology in the long term? If it is, we will invest" And Britain is really going to need long term foreign direct investment from overseas firms to help it out of the recession and to create jobs. And foreign firms who can go anywhere – like Pfizer, who have a huge investment in Sandwich, a great research centre employing hundreds of people, thousands of people – those people won't come here unless they see that the British government is committed to the long-term support of science and technology.

JH: But there is, you said science and technology, and that's the important thing isn't it. There is a big difference, Lord Sainsbury, between blue skies scientific research and improvements in technology. Everybody would agree that it's good if we can build better vacuum cleaners or something, but why does it matter if it's a British team that discovers the ice volcanoes of Saturn's moons or something as opposed to anybody else anywhere in the world? We all benefit from that knowledge in the end.

S: Well I think the thing that has most dramatically changed in the last 15 years is now the spin-offs, the knowledge transfer from our great research universities. This has been transformed. The number of spin-off companies, patents, work for industry, has been absolutely transformed in the last 20 years. And as a result of that what we're seeing is high-tech clusters, very much like Silicon Valley, now round our great universities. And it is round the great research universities that these high-tech clusters grow up. And it's not simply at Cambridge – it's at Cambridge, Oxford, Manchester, York, Dundee. But the important thing to realise is, it's, those spin-offs are coming from the research universities, not those universities that are doing applied research, and that's where our future lies.

JH: But the old line that we sent men to the moon and all we got was a non-stick frying pan, or something, or space was research resulted in nothing er, you know the joke as well as I do. And there is something in that, isn't there?

W: Well I don't think there is really. Lord Rutherford who split the atom said he could see no practical consequences from it. Paul Dirac my personal hero thought that all that mattered was writing beautiful equations for their own sake, but his work on quantum mechanics underlies a large part of the whole modern communications revolution.

JH: And the whole world has benefitted from it.

- W: And the whole world has benefitted from it.
- JH: That's my point – it isn't a selfish national thing, is it?
- W: No, it isn't. But, science is increasingly collaborative and there are great new powers coming along in China and India and elsewhere, and unless you can put your chip on the table to play the game you won't be in the game. The collaborations, you're absolutely right, will be international, but we've got to be at the table able to play.
- JH: And just a very final quick thought from you Lord Sainsbury – when they say to, as I'm sure they have done, "You must understand, David, we've got lots of money to spend – a limited amount of money to spend on an awful lot of things, something's got to give," you say?
- S: I don't think it's for us to say what has to give. What I would say is, to the British public: If you want jobs in the future, an investment in science now is absolutely key to that. You know, we're in danger in this particular period of fiscal consolidation of prioritising current expenditure against investment in the future. That's a very bad move and if we cut back science we are eating the seedcorn for the future jobs of this country.
- W: John, I..
- JH: Final quick word.
- W: When I was Chief Secretary, I left an envelope for my successor, Alastair Darling, and said to him: "There are some things that may not have huge public support but are vital for the public." I said, "Protect them. The security services and science – you can't switch them on and off."
- JH: Alright. You can tell us his answer the next time you're on.
- W: He never answered.
- JH: He never answered. I rather thought that might be the case. Lord Waldegrave, Lord Sainsbury, thank you both very much.