

## **LYNNE FEATHERSTONE SPEECH TO UKRC EVENT**

**Wednesday 14 July 2010**

**House of Commons**

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### **OPENING REMARKS**

In a recent experiment conducted amongst school children in the United States a group of girls and boys were asked to draw a picture of a scientist before and after a visit to a lab.

In the 'before' drawings none of the boys and only 36% of the girls depicted a scientist as a female. There were lots of old crazed white guys in lab coats, hovering over beakers full of bubbling, green liquid.

But in the 'after' drawings, although interestingly still none of the boys depicted a scientist as female, for girls there was a 58% increase in female scientist representation. Scientists became real people – men and women, of all races, with much lower rates of male baldness!

That is the power of a role model – the power to transform our preconceptions and bring hope alive.

And this is what a big part of today is about.

We have with us in this room a group of exceptional women – trailblazers, glass ceiling breakers, brilliant individuals who through their discoveries are advancing knowledge and through their leadership and work are making a massive contribution to British innovation and enterprise.

They are joined by more and more women not only in this country, but throughout the world breaking through the ranks of science.

But the trouble is so often as the children's pictures demonstrate, they are not as visible as their male colleagues.

By creating a forum where we can celebrate and recognise this talent and achievement, the UKRC are not just changing the face of science, they are creating

important role models for future generations of women. They are sending a message out there that actually science is not a male domain. Women do science, women do technology and women do engineering and we are excelling in it! And that is the call we need if we want more young girls envisioning their futures as scientists.

So thank you for organising today and for all you do to promote women in science. Whether it is combating stereotypes, mentoring and nurturing women or reminding each of us of our responsibility to tackle inequality – you are the experts and your work has been and continues to be instrumental to progress.

And of course a big congratulations to the winners – you are an inspiration to us all.

### **THE PROBLEM**

But just as we celebrate how far we come, it is important on occasions like this to acknowledge the distance we still have left to travel.

We are still in a situation here in the UK where only 5.3% of working women occupy professions in science, engineering and technology.

And this represents a huge problem. It is a problem for women who are not getting the right opportunities to fulfil their potential.

But it is also a big problem for all of us. It is as simple as this: if we don't promote women in our organisations we are missing out on 50% of the available talent in this country, at a time when demand in science has never been so high. And that has serious repercussions for society and the future strength and prosperity of our economy, to which science plays such an invaluable part.

This has nothing to do with ability. There unfortunately exists a culture in some circles of science – reminiscent of how workplaces were 20 or 30 years ago – which puts off women from pursuing a career in the industry, and makes it extremely hard for those who work in these occupations to progress.

While there are some excellent examples of good practice, in some companies maternity leave provision and flexible working practices are limited and lag far behind other workplaces. So the majority of female scientists choose their children and

alternative careers instead of struggling with the hurdles of long hours and old boy's networks.

I hear awful stories of female science professors still being asked to make the tea and take notes at meetings by their – often junior – male colleagues. Even in space women are not immune! In 1991 Helen Sharman, Britain's first astronaut, was greeted in the Mir space station by a Russian cosmonaut, with the comment: "Space . . . is hard work, not a woman's work."

And to some degree there seems to be an unwillingness amongst some to change. Just a few years ago, the then President of Harvard University stood up in front of a conference full of some of the world's leading minds and attempted to argue that the lack of women working in science was not down to inequality or discrimination; but because women's brains are just not wired for hard science or technology.

This is a view that permeates not just in the world of science but across our society right down to pre-school education. And the idea that girls play with Barbies and boys fix things means young women are being socialised from a very young age out of a career in science.

So these are just some of the challenges that lie ahead. They will require urgency to break them down. The European Commission has predicted if we don't act now Europe will suffer a shortfall of 20m skilled workers in science and technology by 2030.

But I believe we can do it.

### **COALITION COMMITMENT**

You have a new Coalition Government determined to change things for women, not just in science but across the board.

These are still early days for us. Theresa and I want to get this right so we are still working on the detail, which we will be setting out in the next few weeks and months. So while I won't be able to give you the specifics, I want to give you a broad outline of where we are at.

Part of our response could include legislation. We have already committed ourselves to an historic extension of the right to request flexible working to all employees.

But quite apart from legislative change, we need something else. The simple wave of Parliament's wand will not fix the problems I have just described.

For change to happen we need a concerted effort at changing mindsets, at changing the culture of science, and the messages we are sending to girls about their role in the world. We need to break down that perception that science is boring, or that it is man's work, or that it is not relevant to every single one of us.

This will be harder. But it's those who shape our culture who have got to take responsibility, convey the right message and set the right signals.

And that starts with Government. I want Government to show some leadership. So we will be encouraging more women to take their rightful place in our democracy, as MPs and as Ministers.

But we also need other leaders in our society to give out the right message as well. That is why a big area of our focus will be on working with the key players to inspire cultural change.

- We will work to make sure teaching of science at all levels, but especially at school is more interesting, stimulating and creative. That's something we should be doing even if there was no gender gap.
- We will work with education providers from pre-school to universities to make sure girls and young women are encouraged to make more ambitious career choices – so they have the opportunity to explore and develop their talents in subjects like physics or chemistry - not be discouraged from them.
- And we will work with employers so they understand the business benefits around gender equality. So that we see more family-friendly policies, networks and support systems being implemented in workplaces. And more opportunities being identified for women to advance in the ranks, including work to increase the number of women on the boards of our listed companies.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

So my message to you today is one of optimism and resolve. Optimism because we have come so far – because we have so many talented female scientists and budding scientists! But resolve because we still have some way to go. All of us in this room must take responsibility to ensure women are better included, rewarded and acclaimed in science.

So many myths about women – what we can and cannot do – already have been dispelled: women should not vote, or work, or govern! Women cannot serve in the armed forces...together we can dispel the myth that women do not 'do' science. Events like today help in that process. Thank you.