



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Chairman of the Medical
Research Council:
Introductory Hearing:
Government Response to
the Committee's Eighth
Report of Session 2006–07**

**Sixth Special Report of Session
2006–07**

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The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of Science and Innovation and its associated public bodies.

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A list of Reports from the Committee in this Parliament is included at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Dr Lynn Gardner (Clerk); Dr Celia Blacklock (Second Clerk); Mr Edward Waller (Assistant Clerk); Dr Christopher Tyler (Committee Specialist); Dr Joanna Dally (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant); Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary); and Jonathan Olivier Wright (Senior Office Clerk).

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Sixth Special Report

On 31 July 2007 the Science and Technology Committee published its Eighth Report of Session 2006–07, *Chairman of the Medical Research Council: Introductory Hearing* [HC 746]. On 20 September 2007 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published as an appendix to this Report.

Appendix: Government response

The Government is disappointed by, and does not share, the comments made by the Committee about Sir John Chisholm's appointment. Sir John has a first class background in business, and has all the qualities and the perspective needed to chair the MRC Council successfully through this period of change.

Recommendation 1. The processes involved in making major public appointments should be transparent and open to scrutiny. We regret that Sir John was unable to give the Committee a clear account of the process by which he was appointed. (Paragraph 4)

Government response

2. The recruitment process for Research Council chairs is the responsibility of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, which has taken on this responsibility from the former Department of Trade and Industry. The Government is surprised therefore that it was not asked by the Committee to clarify the process by which Sir John was appointed.

3. As is the case for all Research Council Chairs, the recruitment of a new Chair for MRC was conducted by DTI in accordance with the Code of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA). The Department sought assistance from recruitment consultants. The appointment of Sir John was made by Ministers after considering advice from a panel chaired by the Director General for Science and Innovation which included OCPA-recognised independent membership.

4. Sir John Chisholm was recruited as the Chair for the MRC through an open process regulated under the Code of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The Code contains safeguards to ensure that the process is fair and that candidates are selected on merit. The OCPA independent member on the recruitment panel confirmed that in their view the process was conducted in accordance with the Code.

Recommendation 2. We are concerned about the informal way in which Ernst & Young was appointed to conduct the Joint Review. Tight timeframes should not preclude proper assessment and clarity about how public money is spent. The MRC should ensure that all such appointments of consultants are conducted more formally and follow existing best practice of open and transparent competition. (Paragraph 6)

MRC response

5. The Research Councils are permitted to appoint consultants without an open competition where an applicable framework agreement exists. Such a framework agreement was in place with Ernst & Young. However the MRC will continue to appoint consultants through open and transparent competition; nevertheless, there may continue to be rare occasions when speed is of the essence. In any such instances, as indeed was the case with Ernst & Young, the MRC will negotiate a rigorous agreement with the proposed consultants to ensure good value for public money.

Recommendation 3. We are concerned that the Joint Review did not provide evidence, nor could Sir John produce any evidence when challenged, that the 17-strong Council had been ‘ineffective at decision-making’. (Paragraph 10)

and

Recommendation 4. We welcome Sir John’s confirmation that the ratio of scientists to non-scientists will remain 50:50, ensuring that the relative quantity of scientific input into the decision making processes remains the same. However, we are concerned that the removal of two scientists from the Council could result in a reduction in the absolute quantity of scientific input. There will still be the same range of scientific and medical issues to cover, and it is imperative that the loss of two scientists does not reduce the Council’s breadth of scientific expertise. (Paragraph 11)

Government response

6. The MRC Charter specifies that membership of Council shall consist of not less than 10 and not more than 18 members at least half of whom shall be appointed by reason of their qualifications in science. This has not changed. A final decision on the future size of the MRC’s Council has not yet been taken.

MRC response

7. Sir John did not claim that the 17-member Council had been ineffective at decision-making. His point was that a smaller (but not too small) Council could be at least as effective at decision-making, and that the dynamics of smaller boards is generally better. At Q55 of the transcript, he said that the dynamics of meetings involving large numbers of members and long agendas may result in many people around the table having insufficient opportunity to engage fruitfully in the discussion.

8. There will be no loss of overall breadth of scientific input to Council. Much of the more detailed decision-making on individual scientific programmes is, and will continue to be, delegated to the Research Boards. Furthermore, the MRC has established a Planning and Strategy Group which provides scientific advice to Council.

Recommendation 5. We note that Sir John assured us that “I am [...] very much a non-executive chairman”. We expect the Chairman to fulfil this undertaking, and the MRC Council to ensure that he does. (Paragraph 13)

Government response

9. Chairs of Research Councils are appointed in a non-executive capacity, and the Government has every expectation that Sir John will continue to meet that specification.

Recommendation 6. For the reasons set out in this paragraph, we have serious reservations as to whether Sir John is the right person to guide the MRC Executive through the coming period of change. (Paragraph 14)

Government response

10. The Government disagrees with the Committee's reservations. The Government, the MRC Council and the MRC senior executive have every confidence in Sir John Chisholm and believe that the skills and experience he can bring as chair will be invaluable through this period of change.

Recommendation 7. We are pleased that the Government is taking steps to involve select committees more fully in the scrutiny of public appointments. We believe that pre-appointment hearings with the relevant Select Committee will improve accountability and help ensure that the right people are appointed to key positions. We recommend that Chairpersons and Chief Executives of the Research Councils be included in the proposed list of appointments that should be subject to these hearings. (Paragraph 15)

Government response

11. The Government notes this recommendation. Its position on pre-appointment scrutiny of public appointments is as set out in CM 7170, The Governance of Britain, published on 3 July 2007, which states that there should be a role for Parliament, through its select committees, in scrutinising a number of key appointments that are not subject to oversight by the Commissioner for Public Appointments or other form of independent scrutiny. This scrutiny should take the form of non-binding, pre-appointment hearings. The Government, in consultation with the Liaison Committee, will prepare a list of such appointments for which these hearings will apply.

September 2007

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