



House of Commons
Home Affairs Committee

The role of the Chief Scientific Advisor

Oral evidence

5 July 2011

*Professor Bernard Silverman, Chief Scientific
Advisor to the Home Office, and Stephen
Rimmer, Director General, Crime and Policing
Group*

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The Home Affairs Committee

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

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James Clappison MP (*Conservative, Hertsmere*)
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and **Stephen Rimmer**, Director General, Crime and Policing Group

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Oral evidence

Taken before the Home Affairs Committee

on Tuesday 5 July 2011

Members present:

Keith Vaz (Chair)

Nicola Blackwood
Mr James Clappison
Michael Ellis
Lorraine Fullbrook

Dr Julian Huppert
Steve McCabe
Alun Michael
Mr David Winnick

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Professor Bernard Silverman**, Chief Scientific Advisor to the Home Office, and **Stephen Rimmer**, Director General, Crime and Policing Group, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Mr Rimmer, Professor Silverman, thank you very much for coming. I apologise, we have squeezed you in between the Home Secretary and the Chief Constable of Essex. I hope you do not feel too squeezed because we have been trying to get you before us for a number of months.

Professor Silverman: Yes, I am sorry—

Chair: I think you were abandoned in America for one of those periods.

Professor Silverman: Indeed, I was stuck because of bad weather and I could not get back, but anyway.

Chair: This is the usual one-off that you have with this Committee on matters to do with your responsibilities. Perhaps I can start. How difficult is it, when you are dealing with subjects as emotive as drugs and immigration, to provide scientific evidence to the Government before it decides on legislation?

Professor Silverman: It is not difficult. It is my role to do that, and I could talk about examples in both migration and in drugs if you would like me to do that briefly. For example, in migration, one piece of work that I am very pleased with that we have been doing is what is called *The Migrant Journey*, which has been published, which is a study that essentially models what happens to people who enter the country by different routes. We have also been very closely involved in trying to help establish if you have such and such a number of people allowed in, in different tiers or in different sub-tiers even, how that is likely to translate into net migration later. All those are details that go into legislation and the work that my department in the Home Office does is absolutely essential, is used and certainly has an effect. On drugs, which maybe we will talk about more, again my job is to make sure the ACMD is able to provide the advice—

Alun Michael: For the benefit of everyone, could we have the title not the initials.

Professor Silverman: I am sorry, yes.

Chair: Professor Silverman, I should say that Mr Michael, quite rightly, has a national and international campaign against acronyms.

Professor Silverman: Thank you very much, sir. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs comes under my remit. We support that committee, as you know. Again facilitating that committee's work to

provide the advice that it has by law to provide, and which it does provide, is not in any way difficult.

Q2 Lorraine Fullbrook: The previous Government published a Home Office science strategy. Will it be updated under the current Government or are you following the previous Government's programme?

Professor Silverman: We are not following the previous Government's programme; we have a process of developing priorities in science, which involves committees in different parts of the Home Office and then ministerial discussion and sign-off of the various programmes. When all that is done, it is my hope that we will pull things together into an overarching—I would not use the word “plan”, but—programme and it is the intention to publish that. I do not think that we would be looking to publish a big thick science strategy, rather to move into a process where we have a regularly updated programme of work. We are in the process of developing that now.

Lorraine Fullbrook: Just to clarify, you will have an updated programme under the current Government?

Professor Silverman: Yes. Of course some things are the same and some things are different, but that is indeed so.

Dr Huppert: It is very good to see you here, Professor Silverman, thank you for coming.

Chair: I should say that Dr Huppert is our resident scientist.

Q3 Dr Huppert: Thank you. I am interested in how seriously the role of Chief Scientific Advisor is taken within the Home Office, for example, compared with other Departments.

Professor Silverman: Yes.

Dr Huppert: I am sure this will not come as a surprise to you; I have couple of quick questions. Firstly, do you sit on the board of the Home Office?

Professor Silverman: I receive the board papers, and when there are topics of scientific importance I attend. I do not sit on the board as such, as much of the board's work is of an administrative nature, which I can read about in the papers, and I do not go to those meetings. But I can go when we are discussing matters that have scientific importance.

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Q4 Dr Huppert: How much budgetary control do you have?

Professor Silverman: Are you interested in exact figures, or—

Dr Huppert: Approximately.

Professor Silverman: I have about 400 people working under my auspices, under Home Office Science, and also we have some external programme budget as well.

Q5 Dr Huppert: You have control over those people who work for you, the budgets, the programmes that they do directly, or do you have a dotted line to you and they report to somebody else?

Professor Silverman: No, since I came we have moved into my management more of the social researchers in particular. For example, people who worked in Stephen's department in Crime and Policing we have now moved under my management. But the best way of working is that they should remain sitting where they were, so they are close to the policy people who they are advising, but they are under my management.

The programme budgets, the way that we work out external programme is through joint boards of policy and science. So, even if a programme budget is officially held by a policy section, it is governed in a way that takes both sides into account.

Q6 Dr Huppert: The thing that particularly bothers me is the presence on the board—and I think we will come on to discuss the Forensic Science Service. I am sure you have seen the report—because it means that you have to make an active decision that something is of interest to you. You will know that other Chief Scientific Advisors play a much more prominent role, and I think DEFRA is a classic example. I think of the MoD as well. Do you think it would be helpful if this was standardised across Departments that all Chief Scientific Advisors, as of right, were on those boards, so they would not be forced to try to work out, was this a scientifically important question or not? They would automatically be there able to comment on small details, large issues, as they come by.

Professor Silverman: Since I have not worked in another Department, the short answer is I do not know. I would say that standardisation across Government might not work, because the Home Office has an enormous range of activity whereas a smaller department is, in a sense, more focused. From my point of view I think what is important is access, which I have.

Q7 Steve McCabe: This is a very simple question. I noticed that you do not seem to be hiring any science and engineering fast streamers any more. Is there any reason for that?

Professor Silverman: We hire people directly, so we have 18 fast stream economists, and economics counts as science in what I do. So we do have—

Steve McCabe: But science and engineering?

Professor Silverman: For science and engineering, my understanding is that the fast stream programme for scientists and engineers is a way of getting scientists and engineers not into science but into

scientific posts. I may be wrong, but that is my impression.

Steve McCabe: You may have to explain that one to me.

Professor Silverman: In other words, into civil service policy posts. So we recruit people directly and that is the way that it is done. So it is not that we do not have people who have ability, qualifications or talent, it is that they are not coming specifically through that fast stream system.

Q8 Dr Huppert: I thought Steve McCabe's question was very good. I asked a written question last year that looked at this, because there are Departments that take the science and engineering fast streamers because they have "an identified need"—that is the phrase. So BIS takes five or six a year, the MoD takes about 10 a year.

Professor Silverman: Yes, because it is—

Dr Huppert: I am trying to understand because firstly, they seem to use them for science and engineering purposes, and I have spoken to people who have been on that fast stream and secondly, what is the message that the Home Office sends by the fact that it was one of the Departments that came back with a nil return for the last five years for science and engineering fast streamers?

Professor Silverman: The message is that it is finding its scientists and engineers by a different method.

Q9 Mr Clappison: What do you say to those who suggest that, following the closure of the Forensic Science Service and the change in the composition of the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs, that the Government is not as supportive of science as it should be?

Professor Silverman: Under current legislation, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has 20 members minimum. There are six statutory places, which are for a vet, a dentist, a chemist, a pharmacist, a GP and a representative of the pharmaceutical industry. Only one of those is necessarily a scientist, so the present legislation is very odd in that it has a small number of professions, all of which are important, but it does not have much explicit scientific expertise on it. What we have done is to move to a different system, where there will be a working protocol that has a much more detailed and fuller schedule of scientific expertise. So I would say that the move we have made ensures that there is more scientific expertise on the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and, furthermore, expertise where we are transparent about the general areas that we are trying to cover and where, as the subject progresses—after all, the Misuse of Drugs Act was 1971—and as different fields come on stream, and it is very important, we can make sure that we flex the expertise to fit what is needed. I think any suggestion that scientific expertise is not being sought does not seem to make sense.

Q10 Mr Clappison: We are clear on that. On the Forensic Science Service, do you think the change there demonstrates there is not a sufficient scientific input into Government or not?

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Professor Silverman: What I would refer you to is my own review of *Research and Development in Forensic Science*, which was published last Thursday, in which I made many different recommendations, not just for the Home Office but for other parts of Government, to ensure that forensic science has a strong research and scientific base going forward. Again, as far as the Home Office is concerned, my recommendations—which were independent—were immediately accepted, which is, we should be sure that going forward we have proper R&D within whatever structure takes place.

Q11 Mr Clappison: So you are confident that you had and that science had a sufficient say in the decision-making process?

Professor Silverman: I am confident that there will be science in the development of forensic science, going forward. The decision-making process is a different issue.

Q12 Dr Huppert: If I can continue with some questions about the Forensic Science Service. Presumably you have seen the report for the Science and Technology Select Committee, which says a lot about this. As well as drawing on that, I have met with people from the Forensic Science Service and yesterday I was at the Laboratory of the Government Chemist, who is the other major supplier of forensic work to the police.

Professor Silverman: Indeed.

Dr Huppert: You will be familiar with it. We talked about a range of issues, from a constituency perspective including the closure of the Huntingdon FSS lab and whether the LGC may be able to save it, which I hope they will be able to. They were very concerned about a couple of issues. I will come back to the decision-making process in a moment, because I think that is very important. They were particularly concerned about accreditation and standards. It was very interesting to see the level of detail they go to to ensure that they quality check everything they do; they run samples through; they do a whole lot of blind tests, and so forth. The FSS was able to do this. If what the closure of FSS leads to is, for example, police doing their own in-house forensics, they may not be accredited to that standard. Can you perhaps comment on that and then I will come on to R&D?

Professor Silverman: Although we provide him with his office and his facility to do his work, Andrew Rennison, the Forensic Science Regulator, works independently. He is not a civil servant, he is independently appointed by Ministers and the accreditation and standards are his business. I understand that a number of police labs have already been accredited and that there are more in the pipeline. So that is what I would say about accreditation. We have a Quality Standards Framework, which is run by the Forensic Science Regulator. That is his job. So we have a robust Quality Standards Framework and it has worked fine so far, and I presume it will do so in the future.

Q13 Dr Huppert: There are two issues that you raise there. One is about the role of the Forensic Science

Regulator who currently does not have any statutory powers, and I hope you would agree that it was time that they should have some statutory powers. They can do that. The other is, while I accept that they are independent, there is still an effective Home Office policy on the quality of the labs that will be doing the forensics work. Would you agree with that, at least?

Professor Silverman: Yes.

Q14 Dr Huppert: Can I ask then about long-term research and development, because the Forensic Science Service was noted for doing research and development in a number of areas.

Professor Silverman: So was the Laboratory of the Government Chemist—

Dr Huppert: Indeed, which was about to be the second half of my sentence.

Professor Silverman:—and it should be made clear that that is a private company, despite the name.

Dr Huppert: Yes, the Laboratory of the Government Chemist is a very interesting private company, which also performs some national roles and is written into legislation. It is a rather unusual role. Stability in the forensics market is required for people to invest in long-term research and development. It is quite clear, I think, to me and to people I have been speaking to, that fragmentation of the Forensic Science Service into a number of small components will reduce the incentive for long-term R&D. I saw one example that the Laboratory of the Government Chemist have been developing. They spent £3 million so far on developing a field kit. It is still not quite ready. No small agency, no independent police force is going to do any of that. Would you agree that that stability is essential and that the loss of FSS will cause great concern to the amount of R&D that can be done in this area?

Chair: If we could have a quick reply, please?

Professor Silverman: I do not think what you say is self-evidently correct. The inquiry I conducted showed that every company involved in forensic science does its own R&D; big companies do more and small companies do less, but they all do R&D in proportion. Furthermore, they are expected to do R&D as part of their framework agreement.

Chair: I think it would be helpful to the Committee if you would do us a little note on this.

Professor Silverman: Yes, with pleasure.

Chair: That would be very helpful indeed.

Professor Silverman: Yes, Chair. Yes, I would be delighted.

Chair: I think it will enable us to be able to question you on it on your next visit.

Professor Silverman: Also, we can consider the point.

Chair: We do not want this to be too much of a dialogue between you and Dr Huppert. I apologise for intruding.

Professor Silverman: Thank you, Chair.

Q15 Chair: Mr Rimmer, I feel that you have arrived and we have not really done anything with you.

Stephen Rimmer: I know.

Chair: But we promise next time we will give you a probe.

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Stephen Rimmer: Can I just mention one point, Chair, in response?

Chair: Only if it lasts 30 seconds.

Stephen Rimmer: Very quickly. I just want to place on the record how much the Department, Ministers, but also senior officials, value Professor Silverman's role. The fact that he is not on the board should not in any way undermine that. He regularly appears with

us on the board and, frankly, because he is there, we are likely to take a more harder-edged, evidence-focused approach to something that we might otherwise not do.

Chair: Excellent. You can tell the Home Secretary when you bump into her in the corridor. I am sure she will be very pleased. Professor Silverman, Mr Rimmer, thank you very much.

