

Lord Ashby FRS, a Member of the Editorial Board of ISR, responded to the suggestion made during the Editorial Board Dinner in July 1988 [Title 362], that Members of the Board should discuss the major problems confronting science before the end of the century. He chose the work of the House of Lords as it affected science and how science was used by Government, subjects rarely, if ever, brought to the notice of scientists in general.

A Select Committee on Science and Technology of the House of Lords was established in 1980. It is in continuous session, creates its own agenda and publishes all its reports. Once a topic of study has been selected, written and oral information is invited and heard in public, recommendations are finally drafted and a report presented to the House for debate. The Government may then issue a response, or adopt the recommendations in due course. All this is public and anyone can attend the Committee's deliberations.

The first report in 1981 dealt with the disposal of toxic waste at a site called the Pitsea Landfill, where conditions were particularly obnoxious. The local Council requested help from the Department of the Environment, but they were refused twice and at this stage the Committee of the House of Lords took up the complaints. Finally it produced a most authoritative summary on the science and technology of toxic-waste disposal. The report embarrassed the Government, a television program brought the appalling situation to the notice of the public, and the Select Committee was established "as a body to be respected and in (some quarters) to be feared" as Lord Ashby wrote.

What report after report by the Select Committee showed was that science was neglected, and hence advice by scientists to the Civil Service in various Government Departments, was practically non-existent. The knowledge of university scientists was left untapped and "the universities' abilities to participate in the government's problems is simply not being taken advantage of". The Committee concluded that "what above all is needed, is a strengthening of the scientific dimension in Government as a whole". When the Select Committee reviewed the position of science a few years later, they concluded "that the general state of science in government in the UK had not improved and in some areas it had even become worse."

The Committee has published reports on many subjects such as forestry, electric vehicles, the water industry, remote sensing and digital mapping, agricultural and environmental research, occupational health and hygiene services, science and technology in local government, marine science and technology, UK Space Policy, priorities in medical research and new surface transport.