

Citation for Lord David Willetts on his admission as an Honorary Fellow

Delivered by Sir Mark Walport FRS FMedSci

It is my pleasure to present the Right Honourable Lord David Willetts for admission as an Honorary Fellow of the Academy. David has been at the forefront of British politics and policy for over two decades. His impressive career includes positions in both Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet, high profile policymaking and several books on economic and social reform. Today, I ask that he be commended for his work supporting scientific research as Minister of State for Universities and Science.

David's career is remarkable. It spans two governments, multiple departments and a string of high profile Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet positions. David began his career as a civil servant, spending six years at the Treasury, first as a researcher for Nigel Lawson and eventually going on to play a key role in the Treasury's Monetary Policy Division at the age of 26! before being seconded to Margaret Thatcher's Policy Unit. In 1986, after two years at Number 10, David left the civil service to become Director of the Centre for Policy Studies 'think tank' where he played a key role in formulating Conservative party policy, regularly returning to Number 10 to brief the Prime Minister ahead of major events.

In 1992 David entered frontline politics. He was elected MP for Havant in Hampshire, the constituency he would represent for the next twenty two years. He quickly established himself in Parliament, becoming a whip and then a cabinet office minister. Between 1992 and 1996 he coordinated policy across Whitehall departments, a period during which he developed his reputation as one of the sharpest minds in British politics, famously earning the nickname 'Two Brains'.

At the 1997 election, David retained his Havant seat but returned to Parliament to the Shadow front bench. Under William Hague, he was appointed Shadow Education Secretary and then later as Shadow Welfare Secretary. In 2005 he was moved back to the Shadow Education brief, and from 2007 until 2010 he was Shadow Universities' minister. David developed significant expertise in both welfare and education policy during his time in opposition. He has written several books and numerous pamphlets on social policy and modern conservatism and his acclaimed book, "The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Stole Their Children's Future" is a testament to his deep understanding of social and economic policy. It is also a perfect example of why David was an exceptional politician.

After the 2010 General Election David was appointed Minister of State for Universities and Science in Mr Cameron's government. Throughout his time in office, David was open to new evidence and arguments. He approached key issues in a thoughtful, non-partisan way. As a result, he was always able to get to the heart of the problem. David's considered approach earned him widespread respect and he developed an excellent working relationship with the scientific community. When he stepped down from this post in 2014, Jeremy Farrar, Paul Nurse and many other distinguished colleagues were quick to pay tribute to David's achievements. He is widely regarded as having been an excellent Science Minister.

Throughout his time as Minister for Universities and Science, David was a tireless advocate of scientific research. He sought to understand, and act upon, the requirements of the research community. This thoughtful approach meant that he was always able to connect the big picture to practicality. His achievements speak for themselves: he facilitated open access to research, kept science at the heart of the government's economic strategy, and ensured that the science budget was cash-protected throughout the parliament.

Part of the reason David was so successful was that he recognised the contribution of research, especially medical research, to the UK economy. By skilfully presenting this argument to his colleagues in government, he was able to put science at the centre of the government's economic strategy. In his first months in office David ensured that the government science budget remained cash protected, ensuring that science remained at the heart of the government's economic plans. The fact that David managed this in a time of fiercely competing priorities and squeezed budgets makes it all the more impressive. During David's tenure, UK research continued to receive full government support for a prolonged period. This achievement cannot be underestimated.

David's work has had a wide ranging, positive impact across our sector. His 'eight great technologies' policy meant that six hundred million pounds was invested into key research areas. A direct result of this policy is the Farr Institute for Bioinformatics, the first research centre of its kind in the UK. This investment and others like it mean that Britain will continue to be a world leader in medical research. Alongside this, David's work on open access means that research funded through these government schemes is now available to all. David can be credited with making our sector more dynamic, innovative and open.

Since leaving politics in 2015 David has continued to use his expertise to support the science sector and continues to be an asset to UK science through his work with the British Science Association, the British Bio-industry Association, and the Science Museum. As well as this, he has also taken up a Visiting Professorship with the Policy Institute at King's College London; has begun working on a new book on higher education and has been appointed Executive Chair of the award-winning Resolution Foundation - a 'think tank' whose mission is to improve living standards for low to middle income Britain through research that will help shape economic and social policy.

In government David was an incredible asset to medical science and he continues to be an asset today. As a thoughtful champion for UK science for over five years, David's work in government has helped ensure that the UK will remain a world leader in scientific research. In the words of my distinguished colleague Colin Blakemore, "We owe him a huge debt". I hope that he will continue to be involved in our sector for a long time to come.

President, Fellows, colleagues and friends I commend The Right Honourable Lord David Willetts to you as an Honorary Fellow.