Andrew Miller MP
Science and Technology Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1P 3JA

20 December 2010

Dear Andrew,

I am writing in response to your letter of 29 November sharing the Committee’s views on the Haldane Principle. I am grateful for your comments on this issue. As I mentioned to you in my attached letter of 10 December, I have considered these comments carefully during the process of devising a statement on the Haldane Principle. This clarification has been published today in a Written Ministerial Statement. In a separate Written Ministerial Statement, I have published details of the Allocation of Science and Research Funding 2011/12 to 2014/15. I attach a copy of each of these statements.

On Haldane, you raised a number of specific points to be considered. On the purpose of this exercise, the statement addresses uncertainty over the interpretation of the Haldane Principle, which has arisen over recent years. You will know that the Government committed itself to issuing a statement to demonstrate its commitment to independent science and research, and elucidating the role that government plays.

In addition to seeking the views of the Science and Technology Select Committees of both Houses, I consulted members of the science and research community. While areas existed where the demarcation between academic freedom on the one hand and ministerial responsibility on the other was undisputed, other areas required defining. The statement released today provides clarity on these issues.

Your predecessor committees have considered this subject and you referred to a number of their reports. Issues previously raised included strategic priorities, regional science policy, and the continuation of the Haldane Principle. Indeed, in the past the committee has suggested that the Government’s application of the Principle
should be spelt out.¹ The statement published today addresses these issues and provides clarification of the Haldane Principle.

You offered a further four issues for possible consideration when developing the statement. These issues were strategic oversight, conflict between the Haldane and Excellence Principles with particular regard to regional development, transparency of the allocation process, and how Haldane should protect scientific independence.

On strategic oversight, the Government does need to take a view on the overall level of funding to science and research and its distribution between the Research Councils. Furthermore, every Government will have some key national strategic priorities, which the research base has a role in addressing. It is appropriate for Ministers to ask the Research Councils to consider programmes to tackle these strategic priorities, but it is for the Councils to decide on specific projects and people to fund. In all of these decisions, Ministers should take account of advice from a wide variety of expert sources.

Regarding the Haldane and Excellence principles, excellence remains the key driver of funding decisions. Only by funding excellent research will the maximum benefits be secured for the nation. Ministers have a legitimate role in decisions involving long and large scale commitments, including large facilities, where they have to approve business cases, and involvement in international research treaties. Funding for both categories must be dedicated to supporting excellence, irrespective of location; in many cases location will be obvious. Ministerial views on such business cases should be formed with the aid of advice from the Research Councils.

On the transparency of the allocation process priorities, it is right that Ministers should take strategic funding and allocation decisions. These decisions should be informed by external advice from a wide variety of expert sources including academia and industry, both nationally and internationally.

These considerations combined, as set out in the attached statement, ensure that the Haldane Principle continues to protect academic independence and excellence.

I hope you will agree that the points you have raised have been addressed. Thank you for your input into this process, which has been valuable in framing the statement published today.

David

THE RT HON DAVID WILLETTS MP