

House of Lords Science and Technology Committee Call for Evidence: Setting science and technology research funding priorities

**Memorandum by Aporia**

SUMMARY

The goal of setting possible funding priorities is recognised as fundamentally problematic because in order to do the work of prioritising, we would require a standardised *a priori* sense of timing<sup>i</sup>. Given that we do not know what may turn out to be useful – and when, and where – in advance of it actually being used, doing the work of prioritising what should be useful *a priori* for funding purposes becomes, literally, a waste of time. On the other hand, being seen to do the work of prioritising – and being credibly (or even incredibly) depended upon to do so as a result – has given rise to its own derivative set of problems. It is here where Aporia seeks to evidence the systemic risk to our chances of meeting societal needs *in good time* – and in good faith – initially by way of this memorandum.

1. It is Aporia's understanding that the overall objective of publicly-funded science and technology research is for research to be conducted for public good. In particular, Aporia's *pro bono* approach to such research does not demand funding prior to the work being done. Aporia itself takes on the risk of getting the timing of its research “wrong” according to the status quo, and carrying the cost of that research until such a time when it may become useful. Note that the “cost” of doing that research may or may not be financially defined, or even financially relevant, depending on how Aporia manages to sustain itself in the intervening period. Here, it is important to distinguish between the term “sustainability” as linked to labour standards and originating in development economics, and the more recent use of the term with regards a perceived goal of “financial sustainability”<sup>iii</sup>.

2. In this sense, public funds for science and technology are being increasing allocated on the basis of “financial sustainability”. Unfortunately, a goal of “financial sustainability” renders scholarly impartiality potentially *unsustainable* – in the development economic sense – and here lies the root of one of our current inefficiencies in research funding allocation. The Haldane Principle and its (missed) understanding is a case in point. In order for the Bills that pass through both Houses to be researched by the Parliamentary Library and Research Clerks of each House, before individual Members and/or Peers have a chance to take their own politically informed stances on the same, it is critical that the research produced by said Parliamentary Clerks is as scholarly impartial as humanly possible. If the Haldane distinction between “research work of general use” and “research work supervised by administrative departments” is not appreciated, we run the constant risk that public funding may be administrated in ways that systematically support only the incumbent administration's body politic without any known cause for redress. Over time, the corpus of publicly funded research available for Parliamentary Clerks to draw upon, with a due eye for scholarly impartiality, begins to contract. It is Aporia's understanding that we have been in the midst of such a contraction and can only now hope to be on the verge of reversing this trend, perhaps, by means of this very inquiry.

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3. As such, existing objectives and mechanisms for the allocation of public funds for research are not entirely appropriate, and some changes may well be necessary. Aporia has been actively drawing on the emerging findings of its WHiSPeRiNG GaLLeRY – openly and anonymously accessible at <http://ap0riasofar.wordpress.com> – in order to sound out the sorts of tweaking that may serve us in transition <sup>iv</sup>.
4. In particular, the WHiSPeRiNG GaLLeRY serves to document some of the tensions that have arisen around what is currently governing the allocation of funding for Government policy-directed research through Government departmental and agency initiatives. For example, incidents of *pro bono* research data being intentionally hidden from public access using existing mechanisms without realising that such mechanisms are no longer appropriate for covertly enforcing the same. Aporia welcomes the opportunity to give oral evidence on this and related “practices-in-transition” in due course. In addition, Aporia has come to appreciate the role of Departmental Chief Scientific Advisors in principle, as the fact of their existence provides a timely channel for concerns of scholarly impartiality to begin to be addressed, both domestically and/or internationally as the case may turn out to be <sup>v</sup>.
5. Arguably, the responsibility for ensuring research gaps to meet policy needs are filled falls on each and every one of us, including the need for adequate scrutiny of precisely those policies in the first place. Aporia needs no more incentive to do this other than for public good – what other incentive can there possibly be? (And this is not a rhetorical question). Conversely, filling those gaps pose a constant challenge, including the mechanisms available for conveying the intelligence gathered as a submittable form of evidence. For example, this present inquiry has called for written evidence “preferably by email (as a Word document)”. Although Aporia is aware that the House has been experimenting with video-based submissions, it would have been helpful to have had this option at this stage. This is because the intelligence currently being maintained in the form of Aporia's WHiSPeRiNG GaLLeRY is interactive and cannot be translated into written text without losing the necessary phenomena of the evidence-in-use. A video-based submission format would have permitted us to have at least provided an introductory tour to the GaLLeRY by way of “screencasting”, as an intermediate step perhaps, with regards assessing the possible value of an associated oral evidence session in due course. As it stands, the technological innovation being used to work through the sorts of tensions that have arisen in practice over the past 33-months – and for which the present inquiry calls for evidence of – remains somewhat hidden from immediate Parliamentary archival view. In this sense, Aporia would be happy to help take the relevant pilot studies forward, either by way of widening forms of participating in this present inquiry or under separate, albeit related, cover at the earliest opportunity.

25th September, 2009

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<sup>i</sup> Standardising timing is a non trivial problem, and perhaps an aside may help here, which originally arose during a discussion of a colleague's paper given at the conference of “Mind and Society 16 – Ethnography and New Technology: Current Debates”, Manchester, 4th -5th September 2009. When the technology of the telegraph was first used to support a desired co-ordination of the running of trains across the UK, a problem arose around the fact that the local time that a train would pull into a station would be significantly different from the time showing at the station from *whence* the train had departed. So, it was agreed that time across the country would be standardised to London time so that a train timetable could be used to consistently co-ordinate trains arriving and departing at various stations throughout the land. Apparently the difference between London and Bristol can be up to 7 minutes, and this has more recently been posing its own set of problems with regards our attempting to co-ordinate our activities online and across broader dimensions of co-operative working in general.

<sup>ii</sup> Aporia was incorporated in 1998 to support scholarly research and development activity for social purpose.

<sup>iii</sup> As discussed during the British Academy conference on “The Role of Labour Standards in Sustainable Development: Theory into Practice”, London, 24th-25th April 2009.

<sup>iv</sup> Aporia's WHiSPeRiNG GaLLeRY has been curated over the past 33-months involving participation across a range of specialist communities and their respective UK Higher Education and research funding bodies. As a result, the research dataset underpinning the GaLLeRY has so far been used to inform responses to UK Government consultations on the topics of: good complaints handling; science and society; the patent research exception; and the governance of good research conduct. Amongst other things, the GaLLeRY and dataset are currently being prepared for re-use at the request of other research communities, and for re-purposing as a teaching resource for courses at postgraduate level.

<sup>v</sup> This became warmly apparent amongst the delegation, which included both scientists and diplomats from across the continents in the same room for a first time, during the Royal Society discussion meeting on “New Frontiers in Science Diplomacy” in London, 1st-2nd June 2009.