

up for science. And now there is me. Maybe there are more, but not enough to counter the influence of Tredinnick and his ilk. Despite my campaign, he is defending a large majority and is the red-hot favourite to win – and may well be sitting on the government benches rather than the opposition ones after the election on 6 May.

Of course, scientifically inclined people don't have to stand for election to have a say in politics. Voting for the party whose manifesto recognises the importance of science and offers the tightest ring-fencing for the science budget makes sense.

But manifestos are made for elections, not for the difficult periods when government departments are wrangling over money. The big question is this: will there be enough scientifically literate MPs in positions of influence when the campaigning is a distant memory and realpolitik has taken over? There certainly won't be many.

It is worth pointing out that people trust scientists. In surveys of public attitudes, scientists have always been hailed as far more trustworthy than politicians. In an age of cynicism about politics, that trust is an incredible asset.

My manifesto is simple. I am standing to highlight the fact that the current spread of politicians' interests doesn't reflect the population they are supposed to represent. Science is not just an indulgence for the curious. It is vital to our life, culture and economic well-being. *The Hinkley Times* got a lot of things wrong – it described me as a “top scientist” for a start – but it got one thing right: it is surprising to have scientists get involved in politics. It shouldn't be. ■

Michael Brooks is standing as the Science Party candidate in the Bosworth constituency. He is a consultant to *New Scientist* and the author of *13 Things That Don't Make Sense* (Profile, 2008)

One minute with... Anil Seth

The co-director of the UK's new centre for consciousness science on the essence of redness – and feeling unreal

What's so special about this centre?

It opens this week at the University of Sussex, a university founded along interdisciplinary lines in the 1960s. Instead of single-discipline schools, there was, for example, the School of Cognitive and Computing Sciences, where I studied. It had a mixture of philosophers, psychologists, linguists and artificial intelligence researchers.

Which disciplines are you bringing together?

Mainly psychology, neuroscience, medical sciences including psychiatry, and informatics, computer science and AI.

Can you give me a little background?

A key feature of the centre will be to integrate theoretical research and practical work into treatments for conditions ranging from coma to schizophrenia. One of the dominant theoretical approaches was championed by Francis Crick and Christof Koch, who wanted to take a pure, simple, conscious experience and match it to something going on in the brain. This correlational approach can leave you dissatisfied, however, because while someone can be conscious of, say, the redness of something, and we can see activity in a region of their brain, it doesn't tell us why that activity and the redness go together.

It all sounds exceedingly tricky.

It is very challenging. We think there is no such thing as an experience of pure redness. Every experience is composed of many different parts and influenced by many common things, but they are all bound together into an integrated whole – you, the person having the conscious experience.

What's your conception of consciousness?

Think in terms of the dimensions of experiences: any experience, including redness, will be at a point within that space. Rather than taking a point in that space and working out the underlying neurological mechanism, we want to identify what gives rise to the dimensions themselves. If we can characterise them, and if we find similar brain processes are present when a person



PROFILE

Anil Seth runs the Sackler Centre for Consciousness Science, University of Sussex, UK, with Hugo Critchley. The centre is funded by the Dr Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation

reports a conscious experience, that explains more about consciousness than an arbitrary correlation.

What about the practical research?

We want to differentiate conscious states between healthy people and people who are anaesthetised, asleep, or have various kinds of post-traumatic brain damage. We are also trying to find out what kind of brain activity might show that someone in a vegetative state still has residual consciousness – without relying on spoken instructions because it turns out that some people can be conscious without understanding language.

What about psychiatric research?

One big area is a condition called depersonalisation disorder. This is the feeling “I am not particularly real”. It's not as dramatic as Cotard's delusion, where you think you are dead, but it is very interesting. Even “normal” people experience it: they can be vividly engaged, but at other times, under high stress or fatigue, they feel a little less “there”.

Interview by Liz Else