

# Funding failures mean few Fellows

Only four scientists working in the Republic are Fellows of the Royal Society and they are all in the same university department. Andrew Read asks why

Fellows of the Royal Society, the UK's science academy, are recognised internationally as among the most distinguished scientists in the world. This year, the Republic and the Department of Physics at Trinity College Dublin gained its fourth FRS. There aren't more in the Republic however because of past under-investment in science, say the Fellows.

Election as a Fellow of the Royal Society is "our equivalent of the Oscars but for a lifetime's work", says Prof Stephen O'Rahilly, from Dublin, who works at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, England. He was elected this year for his work on the biochemistry of obesity.

"It's the greatest honour that can be bestowed on scientists in this part of the world. Your peers are saying that what you have done has made a difference."

Prof Dennis Weaire, head of physics at TCD, was elected in 1999 for his work on computational physics. "I was enormously satisfied. I had always regarded this as the ultimate accolade. As far as I was concerned, it was the highest thing I could reasonably aspire to."

His colleague, Michael Coey, Prof of experimental physics at TCD, was elected this year for his work on magnetism. "It was unexpected and I was very pleased," he says.

Each year, up to 42 Fellows are elect-

ed and there are about 1,250 Fellows alive today. Fellows must be citizens or residents of the British Commonwealth or the Irish Republic. It is unclear how many FRSs are, like O'Rahilly, Irish emigrants. But there are only four FRSs here. This compares with New Zealand's nine and Scotland's 51.

The Irish recipients are clear about the lack of Fellows here. "The Republic has been seriously under-investing in science since it was founded. There has simply not been the level of investment needed to compete on the international stage," says Prof John Pethica, who was elected in 1999 for his work in material science. He moved from Oxford to TCD physics as part of the recent SFI initiative.

"Nearly all the really good people who are here go to the US and stay. Some go to England. Only very recently has the situation been reversed," he says.

Irish science "was laughably funded until recently", says O'Rahilly. "It's impossible to do extensive research without a lot of infrastructure. Ten to 12 years ago, I decided not to go back, the funding level was better in the UK. The Irish environment was not nurturing clinical science at the very highest levels."

For 25 years, Coey has been working in the Republic. "For 22 of those years, there really has been lamentable funding by any standards." Science hasn't



**Four Fellows and a physicist: main picture, from left, Dennis Weaire, Michael Coey and John Pethica (FRS). Inset: Stephen O'Rahilly (left) and Dan Bradley.**  
Main photograph: Moya Nolan

been a government priority, he says. "That has changed with SFI. But let's hope it is a change, not a flash in the pan."

Weaire agrees. "There is every prospect for continued success as long as the Government stays on its present course." O'Rahilly too is optimistic.

"I see it moving in the clinical areas. SFI and the bigger groups, like the Conway (at UCD), are starting to develop the nurturing culture and bring out an international reputation. There are new people and they're very impressive," he says.

O'Rahilly has a simple explanation for why all four of the Republic's FRSs are in the same university department.

"I suspect it's because it's a bloody good department, attracting bloody good people," he laughs. TCD Physics stands comparison with just about anywhere, says Weaire. "We're extraordinarily strong at the moment."

"A key reason for the success is the department's 'enlightened' recruitment policy," says Coey. "We've had heads of department who have been interested in getting good people from outside."

The same head, Prof Brian Henderson, brought in Coey, Weaire and Emeritus Professor Daniel Bradley, a laser physicist who was elected to the Royal Society in 1976. "Henderson came in when the department was at a low ebb

and recognised the potential to do something. He deserves credit," says Coey.

Coey and Pethica also applaud the department's international ambitions. "It has a tradition of long-term effort in research. It's the only place with a Nobel Prize (Ernest Walton). It doesn't see itself as a local thing, but measures itself against the international scene, against Stanford, Oxford," says Pethica.

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