

Planning Ahead for Public Research in Britain

THE third report of the Council for Scientific Policy which appeared two weeks ago (see *Nature*, 239, 481; 1972) marks a turning point of some importance in the administration of scientific research in Britain. Later this month, the council will be replaced by a new body called the Advisory Board for the Research Councils on which the research councils and several government departments will be represented as of right, and which will have as its principal task the supervision of arrangements which have been devised for implementing those of the Rothschild proposals which the government adopted in July.

It is only fair to say that the replacement of the Council for Scientific Policy by a body more formally linked with the machinery of government is not merely another of Lord Rothschild's little plots but is also in line with the recommendations of the Council for Scientific Policy itself. Sir Frederick Dainton's working group, whose report was published at the same time as Lord Rothschild's almost exactly a year ago, argued that the executive heads of the research councils should be members of the board and that government departments should be represented directly as well as through the Scientific Adviser to the Cabinet. The Dainton proposal would have given the new board a full-time chairman and executive charge of some parts of science policy at present the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science—international relations, for example. In the event, the government has settled for less than that. The chairman of the board will be a part-timer (none other than Sir Frederick Dainton himself) and the board's functions will be strictly advisory, as were those of the Council for Scientific Policy.

In the circumstances, there are several timely questions to be asked. Will the new board be able to meet the demands now likely to be made of it? Why in any case was the old council unsatisfactory? The council's third report is a useful starting point, for it includes a description of how the council has tried to play a part in the administration of publicly supported research in the eight years of its existence. Its central task has been to advise the Department of Education and Science on the allocation of resources between the research councils, and the report explains how individual councils were invited at the beginning of each year to submit an estimate of their financial needs in the five succeeding financial years. The council would then ask critical questions of the individual research councils and submit its recommendations to the Department of Education and Science in time for these to be incorporated into the government's annual forecast of public expenditure. One important scandal is that the government's own estimates of public expenditure on research and development have, in the past few years, been innocent of detailed advice from the Council for Scientific Policy so that "the council has restricted its advice to the parameters set by the white papers".

The report for the working group set up in 1970 to

develop criteria for the determination of priorities in research, included as an appendix in the CSP report, is a good example of how tentative the council has become. The working group says, quite clearly, that the need for criteria is especially important when the public funds available for science are likely to grow less quickly than in the past, and when indeed there is a prospect that, in real terms, the science budget will decline. It rejects the view that the government should make a general provision for non-applied research, letting the scientific community itself decide how the money should be spent, and, taking its text from Sir Brian Flowers, says that the problem is how best to balance the internal forces representing the natural development of science and the external forces representing the aims of society at large. There follows a perfectly innocuous list of the several criteria that might be adopted—internally, the report says, it is important to consider the intrinsic excellence of the work being supported, its pervasiveness, its cultural value and its relationship with research elsewhere. Among the council's external criteria are such considerations as economic benefit, social benefit and the usefulness of research projects as a means of training people and as contributions to national prestige. The council also emphasizes the need that any programme of publicly supported research should be fitted into a larger view of what resources are available, manpower as well as money. Nobody will quarrel with this exercise in classification and definition. Its weakness is that it has nothing to say about the machinery by means of which these criteria should be satisfied except the general implication that the research councils as they are and will become are well equipped to do the job.

The new Advisory Board for the Research Councils would be well advised to take a much sharper line. It is all very well for the CSP's working party on criteria to have decided that the research councils in their wisdom could collectively make arrangements for the support of fundamental research in universities and for the demands that will be made, in the years ahead, by government departments with research contracts to let, but this view overlooks the differences which are already apparent between the research councils and the need that some at least of the work that they sponsor should be insulated

Evolution Denied

The Editor of *Nature* has so far received two names of those who dissent from the accepted theory of evolution (see *Nature*, 239, 420; 1972). They are as follows: Dr Garret Vanderkooi, Assistant Professor of the Institute for Enzyme Research at the University of Wisconsin and Dr Harold Van Kley, Assistant Professor in the Department of Chemistry at Saint Louis University.