

Getting scientists interested in policy

SCIENCE policy begins to bite—that is a clear message emerging from the annual reports of many bodies supporting science, and most recently from the Science Research Council (SRC), guardian of £70 million of British research from neurobiology to high energy physics. The message comes equally from the international organisations.

For years the last thing that most practising scientists wanted to know about was the machinery by which policy for science was evolved. After all the money generally could be relied on to roll in provided the proposal sounded plausible enough and dreary matters of policy could be left to those amiable and harmless civil servants in London, reinforced with sensible and central professors prepared to commute to endless committee meetings. We neither knew nor cared who they were, what they did in our name or how we were represented in international organisations because the funding was sufficiently pluralistic that if A regretfully couldn't provide, B probably would. And we were mercifully spared from Five Year Plans and the like, which we knew stultified Soviet science, for example. Even when a little forecasting was done and there was talk of shared facilities, we knew that if we produced the goods we would be allowed to go our own way.

The first shock came, of course, in the very late 1960s when university expansion ended and the devaluation of sterling was indeed starting to get at the pound in our pockets. But the real blows have come within the past two years when the budgets for science has been unable to keep up either with rising costs or with the ever increasing demands that scientists make on it. Added to this, universities find themselves with insufficient funds to guarantee that vacant posts can be filled. So the words priorities and planning will assume a greater significance and scientists will find themselves increasingly subject to decisions made for them by councils and committees. The words in the SRC report "... the Council have provisionally concluded . . . that the priorities for astronomy, engineering and the area supported by the Science Board should be sharpened at the cost of reductions in other expensive programmes . . ." can only be a foretaste of what is to come in straitened times.

It is impossible to argue with this in principle. If the government pays, then the government has the right to assert priorities. Moreover in some respects, particularly at the moment as regards questions of manpower, one could wish for more central direction. Do we really want to see, in the absence of some corrective pressure in schools and universities, a continuation of such trends as those which lead to many astronomers and few chemists? Nevertheless the very lack of prior interest in science

policy among most scientists raises some important questions.

To what extent are those who make and implement policy responsible to the scientist whose livelihood may be threatened? The short answer is not at all, neither in terms of being elected by him nor in terms of being required to discuss decisions with him. This is hardly to say that if you call up, say, the SRC and ask for extension I you will not be able to speak with the chairman. You can, and he doubtless will give a civil reply. Mechanisms do not exist, however, for ensuring that the grass roots has any say whatever in the appointment of those in authority or who represent the United Kingdom internationally. No more do they exist for requiring that decisions be open to scrutiny, criticism and maybe modification in the light of this criticism.

It is not obvious that the system by which scientists are appointed rather than elected should be changed. Much dedicated work is done by people who would have no stomach for an electoral process and in the absence of party labels most electors confronted with a list of names about which they know nothing will vote at random—and in any case, who votes? But one would have greater confidence that an election was unnecessary if there were more frequent occasions on which rank-and-file scientists could listen to their representatives explaining decisions and listening to opinions. This is partly the function of the scientific press but mainly it needs some regular forum where scientists can get together.

This would be an ideal function for the British Association (BA) to perform. We have already proposed that the BA should take a more active role in making scientists more aware of their common interests by the forming of local cells, and one of the most valuable things that such cells could do would be to generate an enhanced interest in the questions of decision-making on scientific matters at governmental level. Such regular opportunities to talk about the problems at the top could hardly be other than most welcome to those who have, in the name of scientists, to try and share out a diminishing cake.

A hundred years ago



THE commotion created in the Paris School of Medicine by the false rumour spread by the *Figaro* has been beyond bounds; not only was M. Wurtz, the Dean, cheered, but M. Chauffard, one of the professors belonging to the clerical party, was hooted, and unable to deliver his lecture. The disorder having been renewed in spite of all precautions taken by M. Wurtz, the School of Medicine has been closed for a month. If students again exhibit a riotous spirit, the ringleaders will be prosecuted before a Council of War; which is a lawful proceeding, Paris being placed under a state of siege.

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