

Beating a retreat from Rothschild

British governments have long experience of saying one thing and doing another, and the skills thus acquired are now being applied to the management of civil science. Less than ten years have passed since a previous Conservative government (Mr Edward Heath's) embraced Lord Rothschild's then radical notion that government departments seeking benefits from applied research should pay for it out of their own budgets. For most of the 1970s, the British government was devoted to this principle, with the result that government departments (called "customers") and research councils (called "contractors") have been locked in almost perpetual negotiation about the terms on which specific research projects should be carried out. When the Rothschild era began, the research councils affected were deeply offended, and for a time it seemed as if the then president of the Royal Society, Sir Alan Hodgkin, would join them on the barricades. In the event, it seems that the anti-Rothschild forces need not have bothered. They could have counted on the unwillingness of government departments to change their ways.

A few weeks ago, it became clear that the Medical Research Council had won its decade-long battle with the Department of Health, and had won back the share of its budget filched by the department with effect from 1973 (see *Nature* 23 October). Now, the Agricultural Research Council's relationship with its principal "customer", the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, is being changed but in a different direction — the ministry seems likely to have a more direct say in what the council does (see *Nature* 11 December).

This turn of events has an obscure origin — a report of the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons published in July 1979 dealing with the cost of storing skimmed milk and potatoes as well as with the affairs of the two research councils. The proceedings, nevertheless, have an arcane interest. Dr James Gowans, the secretary of the Medical Research Council, gave the committee a winsome account of the importance of good luck in the conduct of medical research. The steps in medical research in the past twenty years that "have made the greatest impact. . . have all been made by accident", and as a consequence there is nothing that a research council can do but back "good ideas and good people". Customer-directed research is, in other words, impossible.

The committee, known to the popular newspapers in Britain as the "watchdog" over public expenditure, softened to putty, swallowed the line taken by Dr Gowans and the Department of Health that it was "impracticable" for the ministry to control the research it had commissioned, and recommended that for medical research the government should abandon the Rothschild principle. Both parties have lost no time, and the arrangement has indeed been unscrambled.

With agriculture, similar arguments appear to have led the Public Accounts Committee to the opposite conclusion. The committee seems to have been bamboozled into believing that the Agricultural Research Council supported research intended to yield practical benefits (plant-breeding, for example) with funds left untouched by the Rothschild transfer to the ministry. The committee, evidently ignorant of the council's terms of reference, kept asking why. And why should there have been so little change in the pattern of the council's work since 1972? Surely the only explanation is that the ministry's influence was too remote, and the only possible remedy that the ministry should have a more direct say in what the council does? The ministry has leapt at the chance. It may not be long before the Agricultural Research Council is indistinguishable from a government department.

This is an odd way in which to tackle an issue of principle. The Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons, for all its virtues, is neither experienced nor competent in fields like this. Its cursory inquiry into the workings of the Rothschild principle was hardly searching enough to give the two ministries the licence that they have so eagerly assumed. The conclusion may be correct that

the Rothschild arrangement has not functioned well in medical and agricultural research, but the explanations given are spurious. Dr Gowans's doctrine of investment in "good ideas and good people" is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for success — and applies in other fields than medical research. And if neither the medical nor the agricultural research programmes have been changed in pattern since 1972, the explanation may simply be the indolence, incompetence or neglect of the ministries concerned. The unhappy tale of how the Department of Health set out to act as a customer by setting up a network of committees whose meetings were as often cancelled as held has been vividly documented in Professor Maurice Kogan's study (with Nancy Korman and Mary Henkel) *Government's commissioning of research* (Department of Government, Brunel University). The wonder is not that the system failed to work, but that its designers thought it might.

Before the rot goes too far, the British government must decide what it is trying to accomplish. Lackadaisical support for supposedly autonomous research councils is demoralizing, and probably wasteful of public money as well. The plain truth is that three of the research councils (agriculture, medicine and natural environment) are geared to basic research relevant to the practice of technology (*pace* physicians). Their autonomy is an historical accident, going back to the First World War and Lord Haldane's doctrine that government departments should not be allowed to control basic research because they would not understand it. Government departments may not be much better now, but times have changed. The Advisory Board for the Research Councils should be the forum in which the research councils make their priorities explicit. In practice, the board seems to be yet another device for making sure that no research council is disappointed in its share of the collective budget. How could it be otherwise, when the chief executives of the councils dominate the proceedings?

The truth is that the five research councils are different animals. The Science Research Council is an essential adjunct of higher education. The Social Science Research Council was set up both to encourage academic social science and to apply the social sciences to the solution of practical problems; it has been only a modest success, but these are early days. All five research councils, together with the Royal Society and the scientific museums, share in the annual cake-cutting ceremonies of the advisory board. (There is even talk that the British Academy, responsible for research in the humanities, should be included.) The result is that the question of how much of the civil research budget should be spent in or on universities, and how much on basic research relevant to technology, is never openly considered.

So what should the British government do? The simple response is to say that there should be yet another inquiry into the organization of civil science. The interval since Rothschild has been longer than any other period since the Second World War when some mammoth reorganization has not taken place. Such a decision, however, would be disastrous. The outcome would be another reorganization which, in the end, would be eroded by the unwillingness of those concerned to change their ways. The solution, which is being forced on the Thatcher government by its unthinking retreat from Rothschild, is a return to the arrangements of the early 1960s, when civil science was the responsibility of a part-time minister. The immediate benefit would be that there would be machinery in being for making policy as the need arose; as things are, nothing is decided between agonized reappraisals. Such a development would have the extra benefit of separating the administration of civil science from that of education (for which Lord Todd was asking in his valedictory anniversary address to the Royal Society in November and will now no doubt be urging on the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology). How much longer will it be before the government recognizes that its neglect of the past few months now predicates such a course?