

Privatization of UK weapons labs under fire

London

Proposals for the partial privatization of one of Europe's largest research organizations, the UK Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA), have been criticized by a cross-party committee of the British Parliament.

There is concern that the move could undermine collaboration in defence research with the United States, whose government will only deal directly with other governments, and not with private organizations. US officials are said to be unhappy about the proposed privatization, pointing out that certain areas of development of military technologies would become out of bounds to DERA institutions.

DERA exists primarily to support the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD), for example by running most of its non-nuclear research, technology and test and evaluation establishments. But the agency has increasingly been encouraged by the government to take on commercial work. The Treasury now wants DERA to become essentially a private organization, requiring it to become more financially competitive.

But the defence select committee of the House of Commons says it has found several areas in which the MoD's proposals for a public-private partnership (PPP) are "flawed or where significant issues remain to be resolved". These include the difficulty of protecting collaboration with the United States.

"The collaboration between Britain and the United States is the closest in terms of defence technology. It goes back 40 years," says Philip Gummett, a research policy analyst at the University of Manchester.

Some claim that the proposals would also mean that officials from DERA would no longer be able to take part in international governmental organizations and committees, such as those of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This would raise the issue of who would provide scientific and technical input on behalf of the UK government at such meetings.

The Institute of Professionals, Managers and Specialists (IPMS), the labour union that represents most DERA employees, submitted a lengthy statement to the select committee arguing against privatization. The union's concerns are reflected in the committee's report. As well as DERA's relationship with the United States, the extent to which the MoD would lose its 'intelligent customer' facility was criticized.

At present, DERA provides most of the scientific and technical expertise used by the MoD to assess any equipment programme. Charles Harvey of IPMS says privatization could leave the MoD "bereft of expertise". "In



Misfire? A rifle system designed by DERA, whose US links could be under threat.

the taxpayer's interest, it is essential that there is intelligent customer capability in the MoD. Hiving off its expertise would not be a good idea. This is one of the features of the report that we particularly applaud."

Another stumbling block is the political sensitivity of some of the research carried out by DERA — in particular by its Chemical and Biological Defence Sector at Porton Down — and whether this should be entrusted to a private company.

Widespread opposition to the Treasury-led proposals has already led the defence

secretary, Geoffrey Hoon, to announce a second postponement of a decision on the matter last month. But continued pressure on UK departmental spending mean that the MoD will not be shelving PPP plans.

Hoon said the MoD would widen the scope of discussions to "address the concerns raised" in the report. He added: "We are committed to DERA PPP and are confident that we can achieve a solution which will strengthen DERA's ability to provide world-class scientific research while preserving our defence interests and maintaining our collaborative relationships."

Options being considered include keeping a larger part of DERA within the MoD. Spending on defence research has fallen by 40 per cent over the past six years, and the committee says that the ministry remains committed to a continual downward course for research spending.

IPMS officials welcomed the conclusions of the select committee, saying that they echo the union's concerns. The MoD's two postponements of its plans for PPP shows its difficulty in implementing them, says Harvey. "The proposals should be redrafted at the least, but we would hope they are withdrawn." The way forward, he says, is to develop the Defence Diversification Agency and to diversify DERA into more non-MoD related work.

Natasha Loder

Jobs boost for Spanish science

Barcelona

The Spanish government last week committed itself to creating 2,000 new posts in the public research sector over the next four years, and to raise the overall number of researchers in the workforce from 3.3 to 4 per 1,000 employees.

Two types of job will be created: newly qualified PhDs will be offered research contracts of up to five years in publicly funded research centres, in priority areas identified under the national plan, and a number of more senior researchers with at least ten years research experience will be given five-year contracts that will be renewable for a further five years.

The commitment is part of a four-year National Plan on Research, Development and Technological Innovation that will come into effect on 1 January. Mariano Rajoy, the minister of education and culture, said the plan was one of the Conservative government's "most important issues".

Central to the strategy is coordination and integration between ministries responsible for research and development

(R&D), and improved evaluation of government-funded research projects.

The Interministerial Commission of Science and Technology, which is responsible for coordination, will be strengthened, as will the public bodies responsible for assessing research projects, including the National Agency of Evaluation and Prospective and the Centre for Technological and Industrial Development.

Under the plan, public spending on R&D is expected to grow by at least 6 to 8 per cent a year until it reaches 1.3 per cent of the gross national product by the end of 2003 (see *Nature* 400, 393; 1999).

Next year's government research budget will be Pts508 billion (US\$ 3.1 billion), an increase of Pts48 billion over this year. Including private sector and regional expenditure and funds received from the European Commission, research spending will total Pts1,500 billion.

The plan includes measures designed to support applied research and technological innovation in Spanish companies. Josep Piqué, the minister of industry and energy,

says that the government wants the proportion of companies engaged in high-technology projects to grow from 12 to 20 per cent by the end of 2003.

As part of this trend, the government will provide financial support for 500 young postdocs to be recruited by Spanish companies, as well as 1,000 scientists in technology centres and small- and medium-sized companies.

There will be tax incentives for companies involved in R&D, including a 30 per cent increase in general tax deductions and a further 10 per cent deduction for expenses related to research personnel.

Piqué points out that Spain's position on technological innovation is "not good" compared with other developed countries, and that a "great effort" will be needed, mainly from the private sector, to reach a similar level to its competitors.

He says that Spain must move beyond a 'subsidy culture', and that even though the country is ranked eleventh in the world in terms of its research output, its technological exports are "very small" compared with its imports.

At a recent meeting in Valencia with 2,000 industrial managers, Spain's prime minister, José Maria Aznar, said his government wanted investment by the private sector in R&D to grow by more than 10 per cent a year, to reach 65 per cent of the country's total R&D budget by the end of 2003.

Many scientists have welcomed the new posts and the budget increase. But they warn that the plan will not solve the bias towards local candidates in selection procedures.

Xavier Bosch

Opposition pledges to raise New Zealand science budget

Sydney

New Zealand's opposition Labour Party has promised to increase the funding for basic research by NZ\$77 million (US\$40 million) over the next three years, financed primarily from increased taxes on high-income earners, if it wins the general election next week (27 November).

The party is also promising increased taxes to raise an extra NZ\$750 million over three years, most of which would be used to ease student debt, stop fee increases and encourage students to take up science and technology.

The ruling National Party, which recently attempted to take the initiative with measures — but no new money — intended to boost the nation's research and development (see *Nature* 401, 106; 1999), appears to have lost some momentum on the issue.

Many scientists were disappointed that the prime minister, Jenny Shipley, gave only passing mention to research in her campaign launch, strongly defending the National Party's belief in market forces. Indications that the party would reverse its opposition to tax breaks to improve the poor research performance by industry were scotched last week by the treasurer, Bill English.

But the government-owned Association of Crown Research Institutes, through their association, are strongly supportive of the earlier package, and have declared that "it puts research centre stage in New Zealand's development".

Both Labour and the National Party have pronounced that the 'knowledge economy' is the country's route to economic salvation. But science is a less popular cause than universities, where staff and students are protesting against government policies.

These policies, which have led to rising fees and student debt, are widely cited as being behind the exodus of graduates and experienced researchers alike.

This week, New Zealand-born scientists working in the United States claimed the government's package of new scholarships would be better spent on improving research conditions in New Zealand.

Amanda Peet, a physicist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says that higher education in New Zealand is "starved of support".

Labour's science spokesman, Mark Peck, is promising to establish New Zealand's first external body to advise the prime minister on science and technology — a significant weakening of the ministries' grip on policy.

Many are critical of the government. Mark Grimes, a member of the council of the New Zealand Association of Scientists, accuses the government of "a plot to cover up their abysmal record in funding science and education by quoting cumulative increases".

But others are sceptical of Labour's capacity to improve the situation, given that it started the problem with its cuts. The association's president, Janet Grieve, says it is not endorsing any party.

Peter Pockley

Body takes centre stage in UK's Millennium Dome



London

Some of the main attractions inside the Millennium Dome — the centrepiece of the British government's year 2000 celebrations — were unveiled last week. The Body Zone (pictured) is designed to give visitors an insight into their bodies and the discoveries, technologies and new ideas that will affect health and well-being in the future.

Visitors will walk through the giant figure and move on to exhibits on the future of drug design, robots at work in the operating theatre of the future, and an iris scanning display. The Human Genome Project will be featured in a wall of telephone directories representing the quantity of information in human DNA.

Located at Greenwich in London, the dome is expected to receive up to 12 million visitors next year.

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