

April 1997

Ref:

Memorandum for an Incoming Government

An incoming Government will face many policy issues demanding urgent and careful consideration. We highlight here three that we regard as specially important for the future of the national science base and the proper role of scientific advice in policy-making. In a separate statement to be published shortly, we will address issues specific to the Higher Education sector.

The first issue is the danger arising from an increasingly short-term and dirigiste attitude towards fundamental research. One of the main purposes of the public support of science is the improvement of British health and industry. Such support is generally short to medium term and its efficacy can usually be judged when the work is finished. Another purpose, which underpins the first purpose and is the one that concerns us here, is the maintenance of a healthy base of fundamental research. This cannot be planned in advance nor is it easily assessed while the work is being done.

At one time the University Grants Committee gave universities a grant for five years and left them to spend it, and the Research Councils gave out much of their money in response to proposals freely formulated by the research teams. With the much larger science base existing today, and with public expenditure on research explicitly tied (eg through the 1993 White Paper Realising our potential) to such public goals as enhanced wealth creation and quality of life, there are, necessarily, greater demands for accountability. But these demands are being expressed and implemented in ways that sometimes work against the broader objectives of public funding of research. In particular, we note:

The weakness of the infrastructure. The heavy cuts in the Funding Councils' equipment grants are taking their toll and are not being made good by the Research Councils or by private money. The present weakness of central funding means that there is often no proper career structure for research and technical staff, who are consequently forced to live from grant to grant. The poverty of some institutions makes it hard for them to accept research grants from charities since they cannot afford to pay the overhead costs.

The increasing lack of trust between the providers of funds and the research workers. Although unrestricted 'responsive mode' funding by the Research Councils has risen a little over the last two years, it still accounts for only half the money disbursed. The perceived trend is of research programmes defined and directed from the top down and of Funding and Research Councils wanting a more and more detailed say in how 'their' money is spent. This trend has lowered morale in universities, has led sometimes to attempts to dress up proposals to meet the new demands, and even to university staff beginning to think of Research Councils as 'the enemy' rather than as agencies designed to help. The position has been aggravated by the research and teaching assessments. These are certainly valuable, but they

increase substantially the transaction costs of research funding; they are an added burden on the research worker; and teaching assessments, in particular, seem unduly detailed and prescriptive.

Frequent, ideologically motivated, reviews. Publicly owned research institutions need periodic assessment, say every fourth or fifth year, by professionally qualified teams that include foreign members. They do not, however, need the repetitive and disruptive inspections that they were receiving under the 'Prior Options' exercise.

In short, we are asking for a fresh balance to be struck between the freedom of fundamental research teams to choose their own goals (and sometimes to make their own mistakes) and the need for public money to be seen to be well spent.

The second issue is the need for policy-makers positively to recognise the international nature of scientific research. In this context, the Royal Society is already playing a key role through its wide links with academies and other bodies abroad, and could expand this further. These links allow us to run an extensive programme for cooperation and for the exchange of scientists with other countries. Such initiatives and exchanges are in great demand and are of added value to both ourselves and our partners, within Europe and beyond. This is true of exchanges with both developed and less-developed countries; the value of links with the latter is long-term but no less real. We believe that exchanges have sometimes been perceived as having value mainly for the overseas partner; we urge that they be supported strongly for their value also to the UK.

The third issue is the effective use of independent expert advice both on general matters of science policy and on the scientific aspects of public policy such as BSE or the disposal of nuclear waste. A new OST publication, *The use of scientific advice in policy making*, has valuably emphasised the vital need for such advice to be taken seriously and used accountably by Ministers. The Royal Society, as the national academy of science, can call on the help of the 1200 leading British and Commonwealth scientists within its Fellowship and on their extensive personal networks, and so is in a strong position to help the national interest by systematically providing expert, disinterested advice. The American Government makes full use of the advisory capacity of our counterpart, the US National Academy of Sciences, and we hope an incoming Government in the UK will make analogous use of the Society.