

# Science advice test in UK devolution vote

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**With the arrival of devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, British science has an opportunity to build on past experience and experiment with new ways of implementing science advice.**

[LONDON] Last week, voters in Scotland and Wales elected representatives to new regional assemblies, ushering in a federal form of government in Britain. The Scottish parliament will be the first in three centuries.

Both the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly will be responsible for regional affairs, including health, education and agriculture, and their associated research budgets. The Scottish parliament will be the more powerful of the two, with powers to levy taxes on Scotland's 5 million population.

Scotland and Wales are each expected to be governed by centre-left coalitions of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. Parties campaigning for independence from the United Kingdom will form the main opposition in both assemblies.

So far, there has been broad support from both the research community and policy-makers for some of the interim decisions that have been taken which affect science.

There is, for example, overwhelming support for the decision to allow Scotland's scientists to continue to be funded from the main UK research council budget, instead of from a separate, smaller budget administered by a Scotland-only research council.

There has also been praise for Labour's pre-election promises to transfer to Scotland an extra £100 million (US\$163 million) over three years out of the UK science budget, and to appoint a 'science champion' to coordinate science policy across Scotland and to liaise with the UK Office of Science and Technology in London. The Scottish government is also expected to set up a Council for Science and Technology, analogous to that in London, which operates for the whole of Britain.

Despite such promising signs, there is concern that none of the main political parties appears to have a clear policy on three key issues: how the new parliaments will obtain independent advice on scientific issues; whether they will set up committees to monitor their respective governments' handling of science and technology; and what will be the composition of scientific advisory committees attached to government departments.

## Research council

Despite vigorous internal debate within the science community and the Scottish Office, the UK government department responsible



Which way next? A devolved government in Scotland will be the UK's first for 300 years.

for Scotland before devolution, the latter's decision not to set up a separate Scottish research council has been largely welcomed — even by the Scottish National Party, the pro-independence main opposition party in Scotland.

University research in Scotland will therefore continue to be funded largely through the existing 'dual-support' system, with the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council paying £120 million each year for basic salaries and infrastructure costs, and the UK research councils paying for research grants.

Scotland's strong research tradition has made it a key target in the UK government's attempts to encourage commercialization of research. It has a strong research base — particularly in food, agriculture, biotechnology and semiconductors.

In addition, Scotland has proportionately more students in higher education than has any other region in the United Kingdom. And its scientists receive more per capita funding than their counterparts in England and Wales.

A separate research council might have led to reduced funds, says Joyce Tait, director of the soon-to-be-launched Scottish Universities Policy, Research and Advisory Network, based at the universities of Edinburgh and Strathclyde.

But the idea of a Scottish research council still has some support among Scotland's five agricultural and biological research institutes, including the Scottish Crop Research Institute near Dundee and the Rowett Research Institute in Aberdeen.

These institutes, which together receive £75 million annually from the Scottish Office, will in future have to lobby the new parliament for their funding allocation. And the parliament, says one scientist, may be tempted to sacrifice research for more immediate concerns, such as education and health.

## Science advice

Scotland's academy of science, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and officials in the Scottish Office, are keen for their new parliament to have an independent source for scientific advice, like the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology at Westminster.

So far, however, there is little political support for this idea, according to a comparison of the science policies of the five main political parties published last week by the pressure group Save British Science. Its director, Peter Cotgreave, says that science was not high on any party's election agenda.

Cotgreave is among many who believe that devolution provides a rare opportunity for a fresh look at the relationship between science and government after the collapse in public confidence in the UK government's handling of science during the crisis over BSE and, more recently, genetically modified food.

Another such voice is that of Geoffrey Boulton, dean of science and engineering at the University of Edinburgh, who chaired a Royal Society of Edinburgh working group on science and devolution (see *Nature* 396, 402; 1998). Boulton believes that politicians at Westminster have failed to grasp the nature of science, assuming it to be a fixed body of knowledge. He adds that Scotland's politicians will help science — and themselves — by not defending policies purely on the basis of scientific advice; at times, this "is no more than mapping the boundaries of uncertainty".

In many ways, however, the new parliaments promise to be a radical improvement on Westminster. Innovations are to include electronic voting in the chamber, a more consensual style of politics as no party has an overall majority, and more mechanisms for the public to influence legislation.

Donald Bruce, director of the Church of Scotland's Society, Religion and Technology Project, says the effectiveness of pre-legislative scrutiny will be a key test for the new parliaments. He says he is unsure how far they will open up to public consultation.

"The temptation of power is to always hang on to as much as possible, or to open up non-essentials for wider debate," he says. "On the basis of Westminster precedence, I fear that good intentions may not be delivered, once the realities of government begin." □