



October 28, 1976

Dear Mrs Williams . . . HELP

BRITAIN'S science funding through the research councils has got itself into a real mess these past few weeks. Shirley Williams, Secretary of State for Education and Science, whose stock is already high amongst both administrators and scientists, could well earn herself even more credit by managing to sort out a log-jam which no one else has the political clout to do.

Faced like every other body with the need for economic restraint, the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) has been saying for some time now, and most notably in its Second Report published about six months ago, that if expenditure is allowed to grow at all it is the research councils other than the Science Research Council (SRC) which will get any growth that is going. Indeed, to help fund this the SRC has had to expect to spend 2% less per year over the years to 1980. This makes the period 1973-80 one in which the spending power of the SRC in real terms is expected to fall by one-sixth.

Within that overall decline, moreover, there were to be favoured areas. Engineering research and associated schemes such as the Teaching Company, marine technology and polymer engineering, were to grow by more than 50% in the years 1976-81. Science Board research comprising biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics outside astronomy and nuclear physics is allowed a 10% growth in the same period, although all of this and more will be taken up by expansion of central facilities. On the other hand nuclear physics expenditure (at present £41 million per annum, half domestic, half at CERN) will drop to £29.5 million, with all domestic expenditure nearly halved. And expenditure in astronomy and space research will drop from £26 million to £20 million, again with the subscription to the European Space Agency assuming an increased importance. Whatever abuse may be hurled at SRC, it has certainly shown itself capable of rapid response to outside pressures for changes in direction—some of these switches mean that laboratories are having to change their rôle entirely.

Now all of this makes for a most remarkable contrast in reading between the SRC's annual report, just published (HMSO: £1.75) and the reports of the Natural Environment Research Council — NERC (HMSO: £2.65) — and the Medical Research Council — MRC (HMSO: £2.75). (Even the price difference tells the

story). Whereas NERC and MRC, although generally worried by economic stringency, seem to find their biggest problems in such matters as adapting to the customer-contractor relationship and giving their researchers a stable career, SRC looks burdened down on almost all sides. But it is what has happened since the end of the reporting year (31st March, 1976) which now has everyone so much on edge. Changes in the value of the pound have put up the cost of the international subscriptions to just those agencies such as CERN and ESA that are meant to take the load off the domestic budget. Of the £6 million more that SRC needs to find, the Treasury has as yet only agreed to cover £2.5 million.

The SRC has a long way to go, and for the past three weeks has been seeing what can be trimmed, in a fashion which has put even more people on edge. Requests have gone out to directors of establishments to look at their capital expenditures with a view to making immediate savings. Major establishments will have to cut capital expenditure by a fifth in the next year and one round of new research grants, due in a month's time, is going to be deferred. The other research councils are also having to bear the load of CERN and ESA.

No one would pretend that all this unseemly grubbing around is going to bring Britain's science to a grinding halt within months. But it does seem to have generated a fair amount of unnecessary bad feeling amongst scientists. And it does pose problems about whether the whole structure of scientific research—big science and little science alike—should be so easily rocked by international exchange rates.

In the short term, it is incumbent on Mrs Williams, convinced European that she is, to go in fighting for automatic reimbursement of the increased European subscriptions. But in the longer run there is no doubt that some way must be found of giving the chairmen of research councils increased flexibility in their transactions. As it is they are committed every year down to their last penny and have no source of stand-by credit on which they could draw in situations such as these and which they could repay gradually if special pleading found no favour with the Treasury. □

● In *Nature* of September 30, page 359, the maximum permissible body burden for plutonium was given as 0.6 mg. This should, of course, have been 0.6 μ g.