

that failure would encumber them with the costs of under-employed people. Moreover the research councils, which often shouldered responsibility for research that universities were in danger of neglecting, would rightly protest that enforced competition for funds would often be unfair. Morris's objective in this connection seems to have been to find some way of applying common criteria to universities and to some of the large institutes supported by the research councils — the Natural Environment Research Council's Institute of Geological Sciences (budget: £28 million a year) and the Medical Research Council's National Institute for Medical Research are two obvious examples. PPP students will recognize that this problem arises wherever mission-oriented laboratories have embarrassingly outlived their terms of reference (cf. "national laboratories" in the United States). Perhaps a simpler solution is that large pieces of these establishments should be hived off to universities, with an appropriate transfer of funds when necessary. There again, no new machinery would be necessary.

But would British universities agree, especially when they are still preoccupied with the problems of protecting those among their own teaching staffs who have not leapt at the opportunity of early retirement on the generous terms agreed with the University Grants Committee? Not without consequential changes in their own organization which nevertheless would be valuable in themselves. One of the evil consequences of the past decade's short commons is that most British universities have become inward-looking places, more concerned with the defence of teaching posts and the stability of the student-staff ratio than with their wider social roles in education and with scholarship, some of which leads to industrial innovation. So academic snobbery, sometimes a thin disguise for self-defensiveness, has flourished. There would be much suspicion at the prospect of taking into universities groups of researchers from different environments even if the research councils and the grants committee were to ensure that universities would not suffer in the process. The need now, as the Morris committee appears to have spotted, is for the most sensible distribution of research people between universities and other establishments, and for more openly honest competition for what funds there are to spare. Nobody should complain if a few sacred cows have to be slaughtered in the process.

## Organization

The traditional concept of how British universities should be run is one of these. People elsewhere will marvel that British universities enjoy a ratio of students to tenured members of staff which amounts to something like 10 to 1. Some institutions are better placed, perhaps only eight students to every member of staff. How is it that distinguished universities elsewhere, in the United States for example, manage with ratios which are often twice as great? The answer is, of course, that they are differently organized, with many more impermanent people, graduate students and more senior researchers, helping out with teaching. And the results are not always the disasters that British academics predict. One of these days, some British universities may recognize this as a model by means of which they can sustain a substantial research programme, teach more students and yet live within their budgets.

Most probably, however, that time is a long way off. The Morris committee complains in its report that British universities have been slow to follow the recommendation that they should create some mechanism by which their research could be evaluated internally and the research funds distributed by the grants committee shared out equitably. The delay is a measure of people's diffidence at knowing that their research may be discussed collectively — and their legitimate fear that internal mechanisms for distributing resources work politely only when there is an uncritical formula. Fair shares means equal shares is how the argument goes. That is a recipe but not in itself an excuse for doing nothing.

These are administrative matters. The most striking part of the Morris committee's report is not, however, administrative but hortatory. The document refers to the research community in affectionate terms, and by implication makes the obvious but for-

gotten point that the productivity of a group of people, motor-salesmen and academic researchers alike, depends to a large extent on their morale. Part of the trouble in Britain in the past ten years is that the research community has for too long been depressed by the apparently endless financial problems which afflict it, by the need to spend time on committees appointed to share out diminishing resources and by the general sense that even the brightest ideas will almost always come to nothing. Exhortation by itself will not cure this state of affairs, but encouragement and good example may. Morris offers the research councils the challenge of taking that responsibility on themselves. It is an interesting challenge, which may or may not be taken up. But the challenge carries a prize for anybody who can grasp it firmly. □

## End the Sizewell agony

*The British no longer build nuclear reactors but instead hold public inquiries about them.*

SOME months ago, *Nature* offended some of its readers by saying that the British Government should abandon the public inquiry into the plan of the Central Electricity Generating Board to build just one pressurized water reactor at Sizewell in the county of Suffolk (301, 100; 1983). The most cogent of the reasons for this suggestion is largely constitutional. Under British planning legislation, people affected by major developments are rightly given a chance to protest, but the use of the planning procedures to decide whether there should be nuclear power stations at all, what prices the nationalized utilities should prudently pay for them and whether reactors of particular types are in some acceptable sense "safe" is a usurpation of the constitutional roles of the British Government, the House of Commons and public corporations such as the generating board. Now there is another case against this inquiry.

The proceedings thus fall into the category of observations that interfere with the system observed. While much of the argument about the building of one pressurized water reactor has turned on assertions that it could not repay the cost, it seems to have been forgotten that the inquiry itself will help to make that prophecy come true. Delay is notoriously a cause of cost escalation in the building of nuclear power plants, not merely in Britain but wherever they have been built. Taxpayers in Britain may bemoan the fees of the lawyers who argue the case about the Suffolk reactor, but the more serious concern should be the increased construction cost that will eventually be borne by themselves in another guise, as electricity consumers. For the cost of the design teams kept kicking their heels for two needless years, to say nothing of the cost of the interest on the work already carried out, will eventually appear on people's electricity bills, whatever the inquiry decides. So should the proceedings be allowed to continue?

Paradoxically, they are taking place at all only because the Secretary of State for Energy in the last British government but one, Mr Tony Benn, promised that they would. The first Thatcher government (1979–83) began by announcing a brave programme of nuclear construction and apparently thought it prudent to let the inquiry take its generic course. But now, it seems, the electricity utility has given up the hope that the first pressurized water reactor would begin a series, with later versions benefiting from the savings that would come from serial design. For the time being, there is just not enough room in the electricity generating network for such luxuries. In the circumstances, it would be entirely sensible that the terms of reference of the inquiry should be restricted to the local planning issues. The present government, which has most to lose from the derogation of its power to conduct energy policy as it thinks fit, and which has not been slow to override more formal judicial processes in other fields (as with its private deal last week to exempt the London Stock Exchange from its own legislation on the restraint of trade) should find some way, during the summer, of ending the agony over the Suffolk reactor. □