

Neglected points of policy

The surreptitious way in which the British Government chose to reveal details of its science budget for 1984 suggests a desire to avoid awkward questions. But questions there must be.

ONE of the established conventions in British politics is that if a government is required to make public some decision which it would prefer not to see widely discussed, it does so by means of what is called a "written" answer to a parliamentary question at the very end of a parliamentary session. That way, Members of Parliament learn what has been said only if they diligently read the printed records of their proceedings sent to them by mail. This is how, last week, the Department of Education and Science dealt with the final allocation of the science budget for the coming financial year (beginning next April) to the handful of agencies that depend on it, principally the five research councils. So what, on this occasion, can the government have sought to hide? The figures (see page 723) are in themselves no great surprise; the only noticeable departure from the pattern of spending laid down last year by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) is that the Fellowship of Engineering (a would-be academy of engineers that, for the time being, functions as a pressure group for the doctrine that engineering has nothing to do with science) becomes a pensioner for the first time, with a grant of £150,000. It is unlikely that the House of Commons would have made trouble if this information had been made public in a more seemly way, from which it follows that the most probable motive for avoiding public discussion of the science budget must have been the wish to avoid giving reasons for what has been decided.

This is an unwelcome change from last year, when the British Government took its courage in its hands and actually let ABRC make public the reasons behind its recommendations on the same day that those were published. Then, it seemed, the objective was to demonstrate that decisions vitally affecting the pattern of publicly supported research had been rationally arrived at. While there is no reason to suppose that this year's decisions are irrational — and there is even talk that ABRC may make *something* public early in the new year — the awkward questions are qualitative different from what they were a year ago. There are five issues that the British Government should face.

Protection

First, the question necessarily arises of the sense in which the British Government has kept its promise that the science budget would be "protected". Since the Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, made the promise public four years ago, the funds made available for civil research have indeed remained numerically constant in spite of serious pressures on public spending. That is to the government's credit. But in the past few years, the resources the research councils in particular could spend on research have been declining for other than monetary reasons. The pace of inflation in research is not adequately measured by the general retail price index, the falling value of sterling has artificially increased the cost of overseas operations, commitments to particular lines of enquiry (such as information technology) have eaten into what is available for untied research while the recent belated discovery that too much of British public spending on civil research is tied up with internal laboratories means that the science budget will be robbed to pay pensions to people made to retire early ("restructuring" is the euphemism). With the decline in what universities spend on research support well under way, the promise of "level funding" is a myth.

Second, the British Government's conception of what its

advisory board is for is increasingly a mystery. For three of the past four years, committees set up to examine the way in which research policy is conducted in the United Kingdom have echoed one another in the plea that there should be some mechanism for overall consideration of the issues that affect the whole of the research enterprise. The government has stoutly resisted on the conflicting grounds that such a mechanism is not necessary and that, in any case, the Prime Minister is equipped to do the job. Attempts at formal planning of the research enterprise would indeed be disastrous: pluralism is best. But even the new ABRC, to which extra members from outside have recently been appointed and which has been asked to be more positive, appears not to be able to hammer out a policy on questions such as the relationship between public research institutes and universities without provoking complaints that the statutory autonomy of the research councils is being infringed. That cannot last.

Third, there are important questions to be asked about the proper balance between direct and indirect support for academic research. The science budget now carved up for next year is the direct component of support. The rest, once thought to be an almost equal amount (but which included an allowance for the salaries of academics in respect of the time spent on research) consists of what universities can spend out of their straitened budget or recruit from other sources, industry perhaps. In round numbers, the research councils between them spend £500 million a year, not a negligible amount. Over the years, they have been zealous in the pursuit of fairness in what they do. Applications for research funds are looked at with great care, at least if the time spent before decisions are reached is any guide. Peers review them, committees consider them and even if an application for funds is eventually turned down, the authors of frustrated projects may be invited to take comfort in the knowledge that in normal times their proposals would have succeeded. The whole procedure is probably as free from prejudice as it could be, but the price of fairness is rigidity, even dullness.

Fourth, these questions are far from being debating points to raise with a government so preoccupied with seemingly grander questions that it has only a little time to give to them. Sooner or later (on recent form, the second) decisions will have to be made about the future pattern of university support. The University Grants Committee has given itself until the early summer to digest the answers to the questionnaire sent out a few weeks ago. If the committee finds a way to encourage diversity among universities, it will also have a strong claim on part of the science budget. (If it fails, it will probably go out of business.)

Fifth, the issue of whether there should be more effective oversight of what the British Government spends on supporting research is emphatically neither a question of whether there should be central planning (which is impossible) nor of central direction (which would be intolerable), but rather whether there should be a mechanism for tackling large issues of general policy as they arise. As things are, the government's policy on research is not managed but instead allowed to stagger from one overdue upheaval to another. And all this is done in separate compartments, with different ministries following often contradictory policies and with defence research as stolidly isolated from the rest of what is done in Britain as it has ever been, the Prime Minister's promise last September of reform notwithstanding. □