

research. In particular, this would mean formally separating funding agencies (such as the research councils) from institutions carrying out research. The Laboratory of Molecular Biology at Cambridge, for example, would no longer be a dependant of the Medical Research Council.

If adopted by the government in the white paper (policy document) on which Waldegrave is now working, the proposals would probably not make a major impact on top-quality research laboratories; they would be the likely winners in any open competition for funds. And pressures of market competition could well, as they have done with university departments, stimulate a more effective use of resources across the research community. But there are two dangers. First, ACOST's proposal may encourage the hegemony in government circles — meaning primarily the Treasury — of a way of thinking that marginalizes research for which no ready purchaser can be found. (This is the real danger of ACOST's parallel suggestion of a separate funding council for 'curiosity-driven' research.) Second, a range of research-related activities would be made more vulnerable to short-term political and economic pressures.

These are precisely the issues raised by the plan of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to open up to public bidding the contract for managing geological data which all companies exploring for oil and gas in the North Sea are required to deposit with the government (see page 101). There is a clear economic logic in seeking the lowest bid (that is, the most cost-effective contractor) for this work. And there is no inherent reason why a private company should be any less diligent or competent than the British Geological Survey (BGS), which currently carries out the work.

But there are also wider considerations. For example, contracting out the work would inevitably undermine the overall effectiveness of the BGS, not to mention its ambition to develop a single national geological dataset, containing details obtained from both onshore and offshore prospecting. And while it may be safe to entrust responsibility for the offshore data to the DTI when it is in the interests of the British energy industry to do so, the department could also choose to dilute any long-term commitment if Britain's economic and industrial priorities change.

Most immediately, the new development has faced the BGS and its parent body, the Natural Environment Research Council, with a nasty dilemma: how to operate in the 'business-like' way required of a successful bidder for the contract (and, for that matter, in the manner now being demanded by the government of research council operations in general) while at the same time maintaining (and funding through claims for 'overheads') the science-base for which the research council has a statutory responsibility?

That highlights the central flaw in ACOST's proposals. Explicitly modelled (like Rothschild's original proposals) on the way large companies manage research, the purchaser-provider relationship might work if funds were sufficient to meet both short-term and long-term objectives. But, as the behaviour of such companies during the present recession has amply demonstrated, economic difficulties tend to lead to increased emphasis on the former, and to

reduce the importance attached to the latter. ACOST argues that sufficient checks and balances can be built into the purchaser-provider relationship to prevent this from happening. But, until British industry demonstrates a commitment to the long-term view in its own research spending, the argument that its approach to the organization and funding of science can be safely expanded into a national strategy should be regarded sceptically. □

Censorship ahead?

Dangerously, the British government is being impelled towards further restrictions on the British press.

THE old habit of executing the messenger when the news is bad still infects the British government, which is summoning up courage to impose legal restrictions on the British press. But ironically, and in a splendid illustration of how it habitually invites wild reporting of the kind it now proposes to prohibit by law, it has not made public the document that purportedly gives it a licence to act, but has allowed bits and pieces of it to be leaked. In the same spirit might a conductor threaten his orchestra with jail for performing badly after refusing to give them copies of the score.

The circumstances are these. For years, there has been discontent in the House of Commons and elsewhere at the intrusion into people's personal lives by the British press. Eighteen months ago, an inquiry under the lawyer Sir David Calcutt shook its head over some of the practices of which it had been told, decided that a law to ensure the privacy of private persons would be difficult to draft and concluded in an uneasy compromise that the government should give a statutory Press Complaints Commission a trial period to see what might be done by persuasion. Then, during a summer in which a cabinet minister lost office after reports of his affair with an actress, and after reports of the rocky marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales were followed by news of their separation, Calcutt was asked to say whether he considered that the trial period had worked. He, it seems, has said NO.

But the difficulties that led to the first Calcutt compromise have not gone away. The leaking of his second document shows how, by letting information slip into public awareness in the manner it chooses, the government can control the temper of public discussion. Thus has public discussion of many important matters been engineered in recent years. The danger now is that there will be a stampede of opinion in favour of privacy, on the face of things an unexceptionable public good, and a definition of it that inevitably restricts the reporting of matters of importance further. Yet Britain already has legal procedures that allow prior restraint on publication, while journalists' failure to disclose their sources of information can be a crime. In the absence of positive declarations that information should be free, who can blame British publications for fearing that the censors are moving in? □