

CORRESPONDENCE

Britain should not abandon curiosity-driven research

SIR — I am pleased that the recent Wakeham Review of physics acknowledges the strength of UK astronomy and space science (B. Wakeham *Nature* **455**, 592; 2008). I also welcome the clear statement that basic research in the United Kingdom should be funded at a level needed to maintain the country's international standing.

In the wake of last year's science-funding crisis in the United Kingdom, in which the body responsible for funding UK research in astronomy, the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC), was hit with a £80-million (US\$136-million) budget shortfall, Bill Wakeham and his team carried out a thorough review of physics and astronomy. They make clear and positive recommendations that I am largely happy to support, and that I hope the new science minister and the UK government will soon implement so as to avoid the funding problems we experienced last year. (Reprofiling within the STFC has helped with the projects that were threatened, but there is still a £25-million hole in grants funding.)

The good news from the Wakeham Review contrasts with a call last month from the former chief science adviser to the government, David King, for the best scientific minds to be redirected towards solutions to twenty-first-century problems such as climate change. To achieve this he suggests that less time and money be spent on space exploration and particle physics.

It is extraordinary that he should say this, in a BBC television interview, in the week that the Large Hadron Collider was switched on (see <http://tinyurl.com/5cayt8> and <http://tinyurl.com/4cm42p>). The drastic budgetary measures in the STFC took place while King was still

advising the government, and the United Kingdom continues to make contributions to the European Space Agency at little more than half the level of France and Germany.

Tackling climate change is certainly of great importance, but it is not clear that it must be done at the expense of other sciences. This approach would reduce the country's overall science base when it actually needs to increase. Tackling climate change not only requires scientific solutions but also has enormous political and social dimensions. A scientifically literate society will help.

Astronomy and space exploration have long been important in interesting and educating the public of all ages in science. In particular, these fields stimulate bright young people to study science.

King seems to want to move researchers from 'curiosity-driven' science, such as space exploration and particle physics, into 'driven' science. This does not make sense and is not how scientists are motivated.

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Editorial comment should accompany hot papers online

SIR — Online publication of high-profile papers ahead of print is a great facility for speedily alerting the community to important research results. But these advance online publications rarely carry an accompanying editorial comment, either in *Nature* or in other journals. In traditional print format, such an authoritative perspective not only serves to clarify technical aspects of the paper and to put it into a wider context, but also acts as an informative back-up to the press release, thereby promoting more responsible reporting by

the media of controversial papers.

An example of a paper that notably needed simultaneous online publication of such a comment, given its politically loaded subject matter, is 'Genes mirror geography within Europe' (J. Novembre *et al. Nature* doi:10.1038/nature07331; 2008). This paper is remarkable, but are journalists likely to take the point that the two genetic components revealed by the authors represent just 0.45% of European genetic variability? That is, that 99.55% of the genetic variability is left aside in the figures and is not correlated with geography? Will they realize that the genetic maps were drawn from a subset of 1,387 in 3,192, from which individuals had been removed who had grandparental ancestry encompassing different regions?

The recent history of ethnic violence in Europe and elsewhere makes it doubtful whether the 'promise of ancestry tests' mentioned by Novembre and colleagues is likely to be a blessing for humanity. Such tests would be ideal tools for implementing discriminatory policies.

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Last chance to save one of world's most species-rich regions

SIR — A visionary proposal from the small oil-exporting nation of Ecuador, to help combat climate change while protecting one of the most biodiverse spots on Earth, is under threat because of a lack of support.

The Yasuni-ITT initiative is the Ecuadorean government's limited-time offer to refrain from exploiting its largest untapped oilfield, in exchange for financial compensation from the international community. These

oil fields lie beneath the core of Yasuni National Park, one of the most species-rich and intact parts of the Amazon. This remote region is also still home to isolated indigenous peoples.

We argue that people need to embrace such novel propositions if the world is to avoid increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide to catastrophic levels by burning the planet's remaining fossil fuels. Forgoing extraction of oil reserves in remote and/or sensitive places could be an important component of a larger plan to limit carbon emissions.

Ecuadorean president Rafael Correa launched the initiative in June 2007, asking the world to respond within one year. The deadline has been pushed back to December 2008, but this important proposal may be in danger of floundering because of a lack of committed financial contributions from the international community.

As the proposal enters a critical stage, we urge potential donors, including philanthropists, banks and governments, to consider the proposal carefully. An Ecuadorean council dedicated to the initiative could handle negotiations.

In June 2008, the German parliament gave the Yasuni-ITT initiative new life by formally backing it and calling on the German federal government to contribute financially. But more parties must follow this lead. Ecuador is seeking half of the projected revenues, or about US\$350 million a year for 10 years.

Fair sharing of global responsibility will protect two of the world's most vital resources: the Amazon and our climate. For more information, please see <http://yasuni-itt.info>, or contact Lucia Gallardo at itt@mnrree.gov.ec.

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