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Essentials for science in a devolved Scotland

A newly elected parliament and executive provides opportunities for Scotland not only to imitate the best of Westminster, but also to do better in its handling of Scottish research and public controversies.

Scotland is no stranger to self-government. It has had a parliament since 1235, long before the union of Scottish and English parliaments in 1707. The legacy of that separate identity remains, for example, in Scotland's law and its education system. This tradition of independent thinking should continue following last week's elections to a new parliament in Edinburgh, Scotland, and a national assembly in Cardiff, Wales. The likelihood of coalition governments in both legislatures and a strong representation from political parties that want independence from the United Kingdom suggest that there could be exciting times ahead.

An area where fresh ideas are sorely needed is in the relationship between science and government, following the collapse in public confidence in official channels of science advice during the debacles over BSE and genetically modified food. Scientists need to encourage parliamentarians to develop a deeper awareness of the strengths and limitations of science, and to move away from the view that science is a fixed, unchanging body of knowledge, which can always be relied upon to underpin complex policy.

One of the biggest tests for both the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly will be in the degree of pre-legislative scrutiny granted to the public and to special-interest groups.

They will also need to be responsive to the perception by the public of threats to the environment and health. To be fair, the UK government is well aware of these issues and will soon announce the results of its survey of public perceptions of the regulation of bioscience and biotechnology. These results are expected to feed into a parallel review of the government's many advisory committees.

While they seek to be creative, the new legislatures should not overlook some of the more successful aspects of the UK parliament at Westminster. One example is the science and technology select committee, which scrutinizes the work of the executive. In the context of many competing pressures from powerful interest groups, no modern assembly can afford to be without such a committee.

Many of the issues facing the new administrations — for example, the regulation of fish stocks or concentrations of airborne particulate matter — will have a strong scientific dimension. The Westminster parliament relies on its Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology for independent advice on these issues. The Scottish parliament, at least, will need an analogous mechanism.

Scotland has a significant number of strengths in science, and its researchers are at the forefront of UK government efforts to commercialize research (see page 97). The Royal Society of Edinburgh and the UK Scottish Office are right to recommend against a division of the UK research-council budget, as this would have left Scottish university researchers competing for fewer funds. Scotland's agricultural and biological research institutes, by contrast, are understandably less enthusiastic about the new funding arrangements. They will now have to lobby parliament for their budgets, when in the past they were funded directly by the Scottish Office. Some of their concerns, however, could be alleviated if the parliament chose to set up a smaller executive office of science and technology to distribute its own funds and to protect them from direct political control.

In 1457, the Scottish parliament decreed that golf and football were not appropriate forms of recreation for men under 60, and banned them in favour of archery, considered a more effective way of ensuring personal fitness and self-defence. The new parliament need not be so radical. But there is no reason why it cannot be innovative, not least in its dealings with science. □

Impure, maybe, but exemplary

Whatever its motivations, a drug company's big gesture towards AIDS should be imitated.

The news that a leading US pharmaceutical company, Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS), is planning to spend $100 million on a programme of AIDS research, treatment and education targeting women and children in southern Africa (see page 96) is to be welcomed.

It is true that an $18 billion company like BMS can readily afford such an investment. Cynically, one might suggest that the move has been timed to coincide with preparations by the World Health Assembly to take a vote that would encourage governments of poorer countries to ignore patents on expensive AIDS medicines and license the in-country manufacture of cheaper generics. It can be seen in a longer-term perspective: by adopting the moral high ground ahead of its competitors, BMS may be positioning itself well for the vast demand for anti-AIDS drugs that is unfortunately likely to open up in the continent in the years ahead.

But the fact that BMS's largesse may have been informed by bottom-line considerations doesn't remove the value of its gesture. The money will be used to train doctors, help AIDS orphans and fund $44 million of clinical research. Its arrival calls attention to the fact that four out of five AIDS deaths worldwide have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, which is home to about two-thirds of the estimated 34 million people currently afflicted by AIDS.

Against that backdrop, one can hope that the BMS initiative will encourage other drug companies to play a part in addressing Africa's AIDS crisis. Future initiatives should involve all the major pharmaceutical companies, as well as national health authorities, the funding bodies responsible for health care, and perhaps even non-health organizations that stand to lose financially from an unchecked AIDS epidemic, with the goal of making essential medicines available to Africans at an affordable cost. □