

Research Councils for Another Year

THE first trickle of news (see next page) about the financial year ahead suggests that the research councils will not be as tightly squeezed by the people at the Treasury as many people have feared in the past few months. Their budgets will increase by between 8 and 12 per cent in real terms, which is significantly better than increases in some recent years. It will be easier to know just what the extra sums of money will be used for when detailed departmental budgets are available in the next few weeks, but there is every prospect that the universities will be able to stay a little ahead of the mounting cost of research. That is something to be grateful for, and it is only proper that the British Government should take some credit for the way things have turned out. This should help, in the universities, to remove some of the obloquy which will accrue to the Government from the complaints of short commons in the *Annual Review of the University Grants Committee*, published earlier this week (HMSO, 2s 3d).

The prospect of a reasonably prosperous year should not, however, tempt the research councils to think that they can look forward to an increasingly comfortable existence. Although the formal relationship of the research councils with the Department of Education and Science is comparatively recent—the machinery which makes the Council on Scientific Policy into a kind of arbiter between the apparatus of the research councils goes back only to 1964—three of the research councils have been almost continuously in coexistence since before the Second World War. There are, of course, good historical reasons why the Medical Research Council and the Agricultural Research Council should operate somewhat differently, and that each of them should pursue policies which are in turn different from those of the Science Research Council—the direct successor of the old Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. Briefly, the MRC and the ARC prefer to spend money through units directly under their control and whose members are often directly on their payrolls. Although these laboratories are often integrated with universities, there are many examples of units in university towns which are sadly separated from the academic communities which surround them. By contrast, the Science Research Council has grown to use research grants as the chief means of supporting university research, although a good deal of its effort also goes into facilities such as the particle accelerators in high energy physics and the Atlas Computer Laboratory which serve a common purpose.

Very soon, somebody will have to decide whether this fragmented pattern is sensible. On the face of

things, there are several defects in the system. Although the Science Research Council has acquired an enviable reputation for judgment in making research grants, it still does less than justice to biological research in spite of many attempts to redress the imbalance which it inherited. The Natural Environment Research Council seems, on the other hand, to regard itself more as an agent for carrying out research than as an instrument for stimulating research elsewhere, with the result that there are bound to be anxieties about its relationship with the universities in the future. At the same time, the council has as yet shown little sign that it will be able to guide the development of natural resources in the constructive way which its sponsors originally foresaw. The Agricultural and Medical Research Councils are a different kind of problem. Their devotion to the principle of direct labour is probably a serious loss to the universities, and there is no evidence except the faith of some well-wishers to suggest that this loss is compensated for by the efficacy of what they do for the development of real agriculture and real medicine. The Medical Research Council, of course, deserves enormous credit for the wit and energy with which it pursued the development of molecular biology in the fifties. But it remains a reasonable question to ask whether this part of its activity should not in present circumstances be transferred to the Science Research Council.

A curious incident earlier this week illustrates some of the anomalies which have accumulated. At the opening of an extension to the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology at Cambridge on Tuesday, Dr J. A. B. Gray, the new secretary of the council, went out of his way to deny "rumours circulating that council is now increasing its emphasis on clinical research". What seems to have stirred him up is a report (*Nature*, 221, 598; 1969) that "there is growing evidence of increasing political pressures on the MRC to devote more of its resources during the next decade to clinical research and to opening up new fields such as mental health". Evidently this is a field in which feeling runs so strongly that misreading is likely. At the same time, it would be good to know why the Medical Research Council is anxious to resist the view that a greater part of its energy should be spent on providing the scientific foundations for medical practice even if this means that long term scientific research is less obtrusive in its programme. Is British medicine so competent and are British hospitals so well run that the Medical Research Council can pursue its present somewhat esoteric course? The new Clinical Research Centre will help a little in this sense, but there is still a long way to go.