

Association (now under the wing of the British Steel Corporation), have always had splendid reputations as scientific establishments. Others have been equally distinguished by their incompetence. Some years ago, for example, the British Food Manufacturers' Research Association turned out to be making inadequate use even of the inadequate grant which its members and the government were between them assembling. Still other research associations have quite properly said that neither research nor development was as necessary to their members as the provision of a decent information service, with the result that they have set out to provide technical advice and information of the kind which can be provided by a team of skilled technical librarians backed up by only the most rudimentary research programme. While some of the variations of kind between one research association and another may be explained by the circumstances of different industries, the quality of the research establishments created under the programme must also have been intimately dependent on the quality of the people available and on the willingness of member companies to take a long view about the return to be expected from investment in research. It is also with hindsight clear that some of the research associations were regarded by member companies not as potential sources of innovation but as stalking horses by means of which the pace of change throughout an industry could be observed and understood. In short, the research associations have understandably been all things to all men, and there is no easy generalization to be made about them.

In circumstances like these, it is easily understood that the government should take a mean view of the future of the research associations. As they have turned out, the research associations are an untidy and even an unruly set of institutions. No government can be expected to be fond of them. A passion for tidiness is not, however, a sufficient reason for deciding without public argument to run down the government grant to the associations. It is a misfortune that a select committee this week seems not to have been in the mood to ask Mr Price for chapter and verse on the decision at which he and his colleagues have apparently arrived. To be sure, everybody now knows that the Department of Trade and Industry is dedicated to the view that industry must stand on its own feet, and in this spirit the removal of the government grant from the research associations is presumably intended as an indication to the member companies to increase their share of the cost—or to decide that the benefit of membership is not worthwhile. In reality, however, the £3.25 million which the government is this year spending on the research associations is a small part of this expenditure on research at the public laboratories which it controls—institutions such as the National Physical Laboratory, the Warren Spring Laboratory and the several laboratories of the Atomic Energy Authority. It is important that somebody should ask whether the industrial benefit, pound for pound, of what the government spends on the research associations is more or less than what it gets from the continued support of its own laboratories in the condition to which they have, over the years, become accustomed. Without further evidence in public, Mr Price and his colleagues are the only people who can make this study and they must therefore shoulder the responsibility for seeing that it is properly carried out.

The new policy on research associations also provokes

the question whether the new government has yet made clear to itself, let alone other people, its policy on industrial research. In the past few weeks, there has been a spate of conflicting views. The general principle is that industry must stand on its own feet, but it also seems to be accepted that the government should provide industries with better incentives to help themselves by means of contracts for research and development. In principle, in other words, the government appears to be committed to a reduction of direct support for industrial research and reduction of its own intramural applied research. The difficulty, of course, is that the present government is as hard pressed as all its predecessors to know how to make radical reductions in the scale of activity at the public laboratories. The result is that, because of these conflicting pressures, there is a danger that the government may be making less than full use of its own scientific resources, and that its parsimony towards industry may be a false economy. Certainly there is no doubt that in its support of long term research, especially in fields such as telecommunications, the present policy may be shortsighted.

100 Years Ago



SCIENCE LECTURES FOR THE PEOPLE

IT is the great weakness of Science in this country that its professors are rather a mass of incoherent units than an organised body eager to influence others and themselves enjoying the privileges of such influence.

Each one is apt to work too much by himself, and while he often exhibits the most rare skill in discovering truth, he too frequently leaves to others less able than he the task of bringing his labours before the world at large.

Now, while the man of science complains with much justice that his pursuits have not been recognised by the rulers of our country, he ought not to forget that it is likewise his duty to help others, in doing which he will help himself. Whatever be the faults of our rulers, they are eminently sensitive to public opinion; men of science, therefore, have only to prove to the people that they are a useful class in order to have their services recognised. It is really absurd to suppose that one of the most intelligent and useful bodies of men in this country could not obtain their just demands if they set themselves earnestly and unitedly to the task. They have hitherto tried to prove to our rulers that the promotion of science will benefit the country, but have met with only indifferent success; let them supplement their endeavours by convincing our rulers that to promote it will be for their own benefit, and they are sure to succeed. Success, in fine, will not be attained by a policy of isolation, but by leavening the whole mass of the community with the love of science, and when this is done science will rise to its just place in the councils of the nation.

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