

Gesture of Independence

THE Science Research Council has given the government a clear hint in its report for the year ending on March 31 (HMSO, £0.65) that the present review of arrangements for spending public money on scientific research should not be completed without full consultation. In particular, the council says that it "looks forward to the publication of the Dainton report and the opportunity to discuss its findings before any decisions are taken on the reorganization of civil science". The Dainton report, commissioned by the Council for Scientific Policy, was completed in May this year, and has since been regarded as a part of the material with which the Rothschild review should be provided.

The Science Research Council is also as open about its wishes as any official body might dare. The report says that the council reaffirms "its belief in the present role of the research councils and stresses the need for close collaboration and cooperation between all the bodies contributing to the support of civil science". It also asks for closer links between "those in industry and government who are concerned with the role of science in national life". Although the council can boast only of the somewhat lukewarm collaborative document on pollution research as evidence of the way in which the research councils might collaborate, it promises more studies of other common interests.

In its own defence, the Science Research Council says that autonomous organizations are best able to judge the "intrinsic merit" of proposals for expenditure in education and research. It draws attention to the way in which its position outside the government proper enables it to call on the voluntary services of people "with the experience and qualifications to advise how public funds can best be used", pats itself on the back for its policy of selectivity and concentration and promises that it will be increasingly vigilant in trying to match the directions in which research and education are supported with what are called national needs.

The council says that the diminished pace of growth of expenditure will begin to restrict the council's activity in the coming financial year. The report says that "beyond March 1972, it is certain that the funds available will be such that it will not be possible for the council to carry out in full the programme which could be justified on educational scientific grounds". The council is worried that the university population will be growing more quickly

than its own resources and it says that there will be an even greater need for the determination of priorities in different fields of the council's work. The council is particularly anxious about long-term capital projects now urgently needed in Britain.

On strategy for research, the report says that it will continue to give priority to engineering and the applied sciences as well as to areas of research which have been picked out for their promise of intellectual and practical benefit. The council says that it will do what it can for astronomy and in particular help to build an observatory in the northern hemisphere, but that the cost of participating in the project to build a 300 GeV European accelerator will have to be accommodated, as every high energy physicist has known for more than a year, by reducing the cost of the domestic programme. On relationships with the universities, the council says it wishes no change in the present division of responsibility for government support of university research between itself and the University Grants Committee, but that in future the practice will be abandoned of transferring funds from the Science Research Council to the University Grants Committee for the support of research projects begun under the council's auspices.

There is also to be a relaxation of the rules which have so far restricted the numbers of people employed as research assistants with the help of research grants, although the council says that the duration of these research posts will be limited so as to persuade both the universities and the people concerned that more permanent arrangements would be in their best interests. In spite of the council's previous attempts to divert research students from PhD courses to other courses of advanced training, possibly as preliminaries, the number of new research studentships increased by seven per cent to 2,158 in 1970 and the number of awards for advanced courses by two per cent to 1,568.

The report says that for the first time the council had to turn away qualified applicants in engineering departments. In 1970, 32 per cent of its research studentships were awarded to people in applied science departments, but since 1969 the pace of growth has been faster in the pure science departments (10 per cent) than in the applied science departments (5 per cent). There has, however, been a substantial increase (from 180 to 200) of the cooperative awards in pure

science by means of which people working in industry are enabled to carry out research at a university. The council is also pushing hard for different kinds of PhD courses, preferably with a broader base. The Engineering Board of the Science Research Council seems to have been especially active in the past year in assessing what it calls the "total technology" needs of young engineers.

Expenditure by the SRC in 1970-71 amounted to £51 million, an increase of £4 million on the previous year. The Rutherford Laboratory remains the largest of the council's domestic pensioners (£8 million in 1970-71), the Daresbury Laboratory with its electron accelerator comes next (£4.5 million) and the Atlas Laboratory and the Radio and Space Research Station cost £1.16 and £1.63 million respectively. Grants to universities cost a total of £9.65 million, with engineering the most generously treated (£3.89 million), nuclear physics still keeping its head above water with £1.56 million and the Astronomy, Space and Radio Board generously increasing its expenditure by more than 20 per cent to £1.12 million.

The report welcomes the international collaboration which allows British scientists to use facilities abroad and enabled 220 foreign scientists to spend up to a year in Britain last year.

The report is also enthusiastic about collaborative programmes, drawing particular attention to the UK interest in the Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques, the proposed use of the Franco-German High Flux Beam Reactor at Grenoble and the Radio and Space Research Station link with the Italian satellite project SIRIO, and the SRC is particularly delighted that the government—at the SRC's consistent recommendation—has agreed to UK participation in the CERN 300 GeV project.

Disappointment is expressed that the discussions on the future of the European space programme have so far been unproductive, no agreement being reached on either a future European programme or on European involvement in NASA's post-Apollo programme. But the SRC is encouraged by Britain's individual involvement with NASA, citing the presence of American experiments in the payloads of the UK-4 and UK-5 satellites, the provision of experiments for the American programme by British scientists and the continuing analysis of lunar samples in Britain. The SRC also welcomes the possible future involvement in the ultra-violet astronomy satellite SAS-D.