

Rothschild May Be a Trojan Horse

SINCE the British government's endorsement of the customer-contractor principle for the conduct of research in its introduction to the green paper *A Framework for Government Research and Development*, there has been an uncanny silence about its intentions. In many ways, of course, this is laudably consistent with its declared intention of allowing time for public discussion of the important innovations which Lord Rothschild's contribution recommends. Behind the scenes, however, the government departments concerned in the reorganization have been sufficiently active to spread alarm among the research councils and to raise again the fear that in the continual battle for spending money, the Civil Service will regard the Rothschild report as an excuse for getting its hands on an even larger share of the cake than Rothschild recommended and that it will do so without proper regard for Lord Rothschild's own recommendation that the government departments should first of all be intellectually equipped to behave as intelligent customers.

In the scrabbling for budgets and for the influence which money brings, there is even a danger that the departments may go beyond the fields of research dealt with in the Rothschild report. There is, for example, talk that the Department of Trade and Industry has its eye on the funds at present spent by the Science Research Council on engineering research in the universities. The error here is a mistaken appreciation of the function of this expenditure, which is intended not as a direct contribution to industrial innovation but rather as a means of increasing the amount and improving the quality of basic engineering research in Britain, with the improvement of the status of engineering research which that would bring.

The difficulty of making the government departments into intelligent customers is likely to be seriously underestimated, especially by the departments. Lord Rothschild says that many of his recommendations entail "changes in attitude, orientation and procedure which [it] will take time to accept, let alone digest". The public debate which is now launched would be enormously helped by some sign that the government departments appreciate the enormity of the changes which will be required of them. No purpose would be served if they were simply to take over from the research councils the administration of parts of the existing budgets.

If the customer-contractor principle means anything at all, it requires that the management of research should be guided by objectives which are explicitly defined in advance. It will not be good enough to say let there be research on water resources, heart disease or ship design. The departments concerned would have to say what practical benefits they hope for. It cannot be too fiercely emphasized that this entails a radical departure from the present philosophy of research as at present carried out by the research councils. There, as Sir Frederick Dainton argues, fields of strategic research are chosen in the light of expectations that practical benefits of some kind will

mature, but the research councils do not pretend to specify these in advance. If in some fields, the Rothschild principle could be made to work, no doubt both the councils and the government would benefit, but there is nothing to be said for asking the departments to manage strategic research in the sense in which the research councils use the term. There is also a constitutional point at issue if government departments set out to manage scientific research by specifying objectives, they will also have to recognize the need to argue their choice of objectives not merely to the research councils which will be the contractors but also to the electorate, for research objectives will be political issues. In the broadest sense, that could also be a welcome development, yet few people will at present be confident of the capacity of the government as a whole to make intelligent public noises about its intentions in technical matters.

Baby with the Bath Water

BRITISH industry has given a warm welcome to the plans of the Department of the Environment for the reorganization of water and sewage services. The nub of the government's proposals, largely in line with the recommendations of the Central Advisory Water Committee last April, is that the complex of 29 river authorities, 1,200 sewage authorities and the British Waterways Board should be replaced by ten Regional Water Authorities, the boundaries of which have not yet been precisely defined. The only fly in the ointment is the proposal to replace the Water Resources Board in April 1974 by a part-time Water Council dominated by the ten chairmen of the Regional Water Authorities. This flies in the face of the recommendations of the Water Resources Board itself, the Central Advisory Water Committee and also Mrs Lena Jeger's working party on sewage, whose report was published last year. The danger, of course, is that the management of water resources in Britain will be deprived of the long-term planning and research which an independent central committee would have been able to provide.

The case for the abolition of the Water Resources Board, as outlined by the government, is that under the new arrangements, the regional authorities will be large and powerful enough to stand on their own feet, except for departmental supervision. Under the new arrangements, it will be for the regional authorities to arrange for transfers of water from one to another and also to carry out research. The difficulty is that even with the simplified structure now proposed, some of the water schemes which are in prospect are large enough to be of national as well as regional importance. The estuary schemes at Morecambe Bay and the River Dee, for example, are of a scale which is certain to override the interests of individual authorities,