

No Need to Change a Winning System

A shortened version of the views of the Directors of Research Institutes and Units of the Agricultural Research Service on the Rothschild proposals.

● Accepting the customer-contractor principle for applied research development, several principal questions still require consideration. To maintain and improve the basic materials on which agriculture and food depend—the soil and breeding stocks of animals and plants—is a long-term commitment of agricultural research and, moreover, one of the most important aspects of environmental conservation for posterity. Because of this, national requirements cannot be met without a substantial proportion of long-term research and the customer organization must represent at least three largely independent interests—the agricultural industry, the consumers of agricultural produce, and in a broader sense the entire community now and in the future—interests which involve other organizations and other government departments than the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF).

● Problems and priorities have hitherto been identified partly through farmer and MAFF representation on the council and on governing bodies and advisory committees, partly through many technical committees on which the industry and the MAFF are represented, and partly through informal contacts and our own professional assessment of the industry's needs. The machinery needs strengthening—action with that aim being already in progress—but we do not believe it would be helpful to interpose a single new agency between ARC and the real customers for its research.

● Responsibility for allocating tasks between and within research centres must remain with the ARC, free from interference by ministry officials. Experience proves that administrative ability is not sufficient to direct research.

● It is moreover important that ARC research be protected from administrative pressures and we cannot agree that such considerations “have little or no bearing”. There could be no protection if an executive ministry controlled a substantial part of ARC funds and some form of intervention by an independent authority would be essential.

● We agree that the present scientific strength of the MAFF is inadequate for the functions envisaged, and that a new “Chief Scientist Organization” would need to be created, before introducing a system in which that ministry was the principal customer. We welcome the proposal to appoint a Chief

Scientist. But it will take him several years to assess the situation and establish himself so as to have the confidence of farmers and ARC staff. Hence it cannot be advantageous for him precipitately to assume control of research contracts.

● In implementing the customer-contractor principle, it is crucial to appreciate the following. First, three different types of research were distinguished by the CSP, tactical, strategic and basic, the first representing short-term applied research. The research and development contracts recommended by Lord Rothschild should apply only to tactical research (compare the suggestion in his appendix (ii) that the programmes of institutes which “come into the category of what is sometimes called ‘strategic research’ should be excluded from the ‘customer-contractor’ relationship”). The ARC estimates that about 20 per cent of the ARC funds now go to tactical research and development, 60 per cent to strategic research “concerned with the understanding of an agricultural process”, and 20 per cent to basic research. Second, Lord Rothschild's proposals would have the effect of raising the proportion for applied research and development to 78 per cent (£14.5 million out of £18.5 million), including a 10 per cent “surcharge for general research”. The remaining 22 per cent is to be spent on units in universities and on strategic research (that is, “research in a field of agricultural interest, but without an applied objective which is likely to be realized in a specified time, however long”) in five institutes, at only two of which basic research is mentioned (appendices (ii) and (iii)). Besides restricting long-term research virtually to units and a few institutes, such proposals mean that almost the entire programme of most institutes must consist of short-term research and development projects with little of their present long-term strategic content.

● In contrast to Lord Rothschild we think that strategic research has long-term practical objectives, being essential for the understanding of applied problems, and hence much of it should be undertaken by the ARC. Sufficient continuity of purpose can seldom be assured in university departments. Moreover it is our experience that a well balanced mixture of basic, long-term and short-term applied research is highly de-

sirable (compare Rothschild, paragraph 39) to attract the most able scientists and stimulate maximum creativity, and should be maintained in any circumstances. We know the mutual benefit to each when the three types of research are carried out in the same place by the same workers. Therefore, we emphatically disagree with restricting basic research to certain institutes while confining other institutes to applied work. Similarly, we strongly disagree with Lord Rothschild's suggested overall balance between the types of research. In the national interest, there is a need for a substantial volume of strategic agricultural research which, if not done by the ARC, will not be done at all. Lord Rothschild has made no case for diverting the ARC budget for this purpose to contracts for short-term problems.

● Developmental work, as distinct from research, has received little mention in spite of its vital importance. Lord Rothschild proposes that the customer should have greater than usual financial control, but appears to suggest (paragraph 28) that control should be by the chief executive of the research council. In the agricultural field, however, one would suppose development to be the function of the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service of the MAFF. Development work has nevertheless been a significant part of the ARC programme, though it should be better integrated with similar ministry activities in which not enough help has been invited from ARC scientists. We consider that this integration would be promoted by transferring control of the ministry's experiment stations to the research council.

● The Rothschild report takes no account of the fact that the high standard of agricultural research depends critically on the quality and enthusiasm of our staff, both of which are excellent. We view with concern proposals whereby ARC income might be reduced by 27 per cent over 4 years with possible further reductions thereafter, because this must cause the dismissal or loss of many staff, which would destroy the confidence of the remainder and discourage them from studying any but the most immediate problems.

● To conclude, we refer to the conclusion of Lord Rothschild's report: “The recommendations made in this report cannot be implemented overnight”. They cannot. The practical way to improve the structure of agricultural research, without detriment to progress, would be to strengthen the existing ARC structure in close consultation with the Agricultural Departments.