

OLD WORLD

Lord Bessborough Delivers Several Telling Blows

GOVERNMENT research establishments should not normally undertake repayment work for industry, according to the Committee of Enquiry into the Research Associations which reported this week. Lord Bessborough's committee feels that research associations by their long and intimate contact with industry are better equipped to undertake work of industrial importance than most of the government establishments. (*Industrial Research and Development, Conference of Industrial Research Associations, £3.00.*)

But even where the work requires equipment and expertise not found within the appropriate research association so that the only appropriate place to do the research is a government establishment, the committee says that the research association concerned should be brought into the management of this activity. The committee is particularly concerned about the role that the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell is now playing in undertaking contract research for British industry and it suggests that the establishment should be subjected to greater control.

It is clear that Lord Bessborough and his colleagues would prefer to see Harwell converted into a large research association but they reluctantly admit that such a conversion "would be cumbersome". It would be preferable they say, to break the establishment down into "separate research association-type units". Alternatively the facilities at Harwell could be transferred to existing research associations. But Harwell is not the only government establishment to come under attack, and the management of the ship division at the National Physical Laboratory appears in a far from good light. The British Ship Research Association carries out its ship towing work at the ship tank at the NPL, and, according to the report, "the relatively uncoordinated way" in which NPL conducts its ship tank work makes "BSRA's planning, programming and project control very difficult".

The solution, according to Lord Bessborough is for the management of the ship tank to be transferred from the NPL's hands to BSRA. This, according to the report, would be in "the best national interest", but a merger of BSRA into NPL, which has been suggested in the past, would not be desir-

able. It is argued that as the research association's chief interest is to serve their industry and as the NPL's objectives are to serve "more loosely defined national requirements", marriage of the NPL and BSRA would not be effective. But it is, perhaps, the shipbuilding industry's reported wish not to be buried within a national laboratory that carried most weight with the committee.

The committee comes out in support of the customer-contractor principle but it feels that it is not wise to "carry a general principle to an extreme". Support is also given to the government's decision, made last autumn, to abolish the grant-in-aid system to research associations, although the committee recognises that this will put several research associations under financial pressure. A general grant, according to the report "can insulate the recipient from commercial pressures and lead to a lack of initiative and commercial enterprise." In the same context the committee welcomes the recommendation made by the Select Committee on Science and Technology in their third report last year that contracts between industry and

government research establishments should not be subsidized out of public funds.

The report recognizes that to substitute fees for contract research for the sums presently received as a grant is not going to be satisfactory for the associations and it recommends that the government should continue to contribute monies other than for contract work.

Lord Bessborough also says that if more had been invested in research and development in the "bread and butter" industries rather than in "glamorous high technology", then "perhaps our balance of payments history and recent economic progress might have been considerably improved".

The committee feels, however, that the research association systems is easily justified. In 1970 the research associations spent £17 million supporting industrial technology, which is about 2.5 per cent of the amount spent within private industry on research and development. The government contributes £4 million a year to the research associations, which is 0.7 per cent of its total expenditure on research and development. Neverthe-

EUROPEAN RESEARCH

Advice for the European Commission

THE first meeting of CERD, the European Commission's unofficial advisory body on all matters scientific, went off last week with a lengthy discussion on the committee's objects and a convoluted attempt to define pure and applied research.

The twenty-one man committee, whose membership includes scientists, industrialists and representatives of research councils, all of whom are there in their own right rather than as representatives of their governments, is to advise the commission on all matters relating to research and development that fall within the commission's scope. The committee's opinions will be canvassed before the commission officially formulates its policies, and meetings will take place at least twice a year and more frequently if necessary.

Last week's meeting was judged highly successful in Brussels, although differences in approach, ranging from the Rothschild-like theory that research should only tackle specific problems to the more European line that an overall science policy should be created, had to

be ironed out. The meeting ended with each country retiring to decide which areas are in need of research and their proposals will be discussed at the next meeting of the committee. The British members of CERD are Sir Brian Flowers, Chairman of the Science Research Council, Dr John Kendrew, MRC, Cambridge, and Lord Kennet. The committee's chairman, at least until the commission appoints a full-time scientific adviser, is Professor Hendrik Casimir, Director of Philips and the commission's current scientific adviser. Other members of CERD are: Barry, V. C. (Dublin), Bertin, J. (Plaisir, France), Bölkow, L. (Munich), Braans, C. M. (Jutphaas, Holland), Caracciolo di Forino, A. (Rome), Danzin, A. M. (Versailles), De Gennes, P. G. (Orsay, France), Della Porta (Milan), Demeester, M. (Brussels), Janssen, D. (Brussels), van Lieshout, R. (Hague), Lüst, R. (Munich), Metz, P. (Luxembourg), Peccei, A. (Rome), Rasmussen, P. N. (Copenhagen), Weissemel, C. (Frankfurt), Winterfeld, K. E. (Lyngby, Denmark).