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Your man in Whitehall

TWICE in the past three months the absence of a Chief Scientific Adviser to the government has been pointedly remarked on. Sir Alan Hodgkin, retiring President of the Royal Society, drew attention to the vacant post in his farewell address in November. Now the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, in an exchange of letters with the Prime Minister, brings the issue to the surface again. But are those who ask for one person to head government's central machinery for co-ordination of policymaking really clear that the system would thereby work any better than it does at present?

The post of Chief Scientific Adviser based in the Cabinet Office has been vacant for almost two years. Sir Alan Cottrell, having served for his five-year term, returned to academic life. His deputy, Dr Robert Press, a career civil servant with a background in nuclear matters, took over responsibility for science and technology without being named as chief adviser. Dr Press retires this summer; hence the rumblings.

The Select Committee says that in the past its suggestion of a ministry for research and development was brushed aside because the Chief Scientific Adviser was already said to be responsible for ensuring adequate co-operation and co-ordination between departments. In the absence of such an adviser, the committee says, "[we] wonder whether assurances given by successive governments about the co-ordination of research and development continue to represent government policy . . . failure to fill the vacancy has caused considerable dismay in the scientific community, and has raised doubts about the sincerity of the government's commitment to the importance of an independent scientific voice in the formulation of policies at the highest level."

In reply, the Prime Minister emphasises that Dr Press's appointment was intended as transitional, but that he has in mind stronger central co-ordination—though the appointment of Chief Scientists in many ministries "emphasised the increasing importance attached to scientific advice and underlined the impracticability of providing this from one central point. The creation of the Central Policy Review Staff as a multidisciplinary body of advice to the Cabinet also added a new dimension." Mr Wilson missed an excellent opportunity very recently of further sounding out views on science in government by devoting most of a speech to the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee to fulsome praise for the National Research Development Corporation (repeated almost verbatim from the Blackett Memorial Lecture of three months earlier), and by relegating questions of science in government to a few sentences on the

difficulty of pleasing everyone all the time. The question of advisers in general was passed off with a joke about an advisory bull belonging to FAO.

The real trouble with the post of Chief Scientific Adviser is that he is placed in such an ambiguous position. The Select Committee's letter refers to at least four functions:

- responsibility for interdepartmental coordination and co-operation
- co-ordination of research and development
- an independent scientific voice in policy formulation
- articulation of scientific advice to the Cabinet.

The academic community would undoubtedly add a fifth—provision of a direct channel for academic scientists to have access to government particularly when they held views which diverged from those expressed by civil service scientists. Industrial scientists might add further functions. The job begins to look attractive only to a megalomaniac or a superman.

Further, neither of the last two advisers exactly raved about the job after their departure; they certainly gave the impression that they found it rather frustrating. If famous names were now to be canvassed for the post, the government would have a lot of arm-twisting to do. And if the scientific community has been expressing dismay at the lack of a Chief Scientific Adviser, it has been doing so in a most *sotto voce* way.

Mr Wilson declares that he wants stronger central co-ordination but can do without the centralised advice, so he will probably look for a sound scientific administrator from within the civil service rather than a famous name from without. If he views the civil service as the sole source of scientific input to the government, this makes sense. But hundreds of millions of pounds are spent each year on nurturing science and technology both in academe and industry. Much of this expenditure will not result in anything that the government desperately needs to know about, but the existence within the Cabinet Office of some sort of external liaison office accessible to research councils, industrial organisations and individual scientists might well ensure that when matters of importance do turn up, they do not get tangled up in Whitehall bureaucracy and interdepartmental rivalry.

The post of Chief Scientific Adviser should no longer be retained. But when Mr Wilson recruits his top co-ordinator for departmental science he should also hire a good scientist from outside the civil service as liaison officer with the outside world.