

nature

10 November 1977

Mr Desai takes on the scientists

USER departments, more relevant research, national needs . . . familiar words in Britain during the period of the Rothschild reorganisation, familiar words more recently in Australia during attempts to dismember the the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Now the Indian government of Mr Morarji Desai is going through a similar operation with its own large scientific body, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). And the opposition to these moves from the Indian scientific community is extremely vocal.

CSIR is an organisation very largely conducting applied research. First established in 1942, it is most closely associated with Mr Nehru who put it on its present firm footing in 1952 and ensured, by making the prime minister its president, that the organisation had a substantial degree of autonomy, in that its director general could by-pass ministerial bureaucracy. Furthermore, Nehru made himself minister for science, and in recent years Mrs Gandhi has also held that post, so there have been the clearest signs to Indian scientists of the importance that the government attached to science and technology. In these past thirty-five years CSIR has blossomed into an organisation with forty-four laboratories including ten cooperative research associations.

The days are gone, however, when applied scientists could claim total freedom from direction. And the arrival on the scene of governments like those of Edward Heath, Malcolm Fraser and now Morarji Desai to find large expensive autonomous organisations nominally completely decoupled from departments working in the same field was bound to trigger off some very serious questioning. In cold logic many of CSIR's laboratories could as sensibly be constituent of ministries such as industry, energy, electronics and agriculture. Thus the dismemberment of CSIR with up to 28 laboratories detached to user-ministries is not without a rational basis.

Against this, however, some very serious arguments must be ranged. First, there seems to have been no consultation of scientists within CSIR before the cabinet made its decision—and thus no opportunity for the

sort of debate which might well have thrown up alternative structures. Second, CSIR laboratories are at present expected to be accessible to government and industry alike, whereas once in the control of a ministry access might become much more restricted for those not within a tight circle. This is an interesting point which in the British context would certainly be worth studying. Third, ministers with tame scientists may be tempted to use these scientists simply to bolster up their own prejudices and not for objective assessment. Fourth, India leads the world in ministerial bureaucracy and red-tape (thanks to the British), so any move that puts scientists under the control of so many paper-shufflers and rule-book-followers has to be regarded with alarm.

These are weighty objections which in the British situation were only alleviated by the placing of chief scientists of intellectual distinction right in the midst of the relevant ministries. In India, the path to new machinery may well be different but for certain it must take note of the concerns of scientists. This has not yet happened, and the government will find itself with a very dispirited bunch of scientists if it does not bring them more into the discussion.

A rather different objection comes from those who fear that the dismantling of CSIR is one stage in the process of reducing India's aspirations to technological self-reliance. CSIR has pursued many scientific projects specially aimed at cutting down the need for expensive imports, and anything that rewards the organisation for this by splitting it up is bound to be viewed with great suspicion. The Indian National Science Academy says this is an elliptical way in a statement which recognises the benefits of some foreign technology but points to the immense pools of talent available. The press have taken it up more stridently in statements such as 'CSIR has been an eyesore to the multi-nationals', and 'CSIR is the first martyr to the Janata Government's ill-concealed solicitude for the international giants'.

All this adds up to a compelling case that the government should come out and debate its proposals openly. Once CSIR is in pieces a major national asset is never likely to be put together again. □