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Threats for British academic research

Research councils in the United Kingdom have recently been spared the axe. Is it now about to fall?

Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, was proudly telling the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee a year ago that the British government's spending on research had been "protected" from the round of government economies then coming into effect. Will she be able to make the same boast when the government's budget for 1982-83 has been completed? For the past several months, the research councils have been as much concerned with helping British universities out of trouble as with their own affairs. Now, with financial planning for 1982-83 under way, they are alarmed that, next time, the Treasury's finger will point at them.

The research councils have become vulnerable for several reasons, but chiefly because the British government's economic policies have failed. Neither the government nor its supporters can have imagined that it would be embarking on its fourth year in office (next spring) with yet another deflationary budget. By then, the assumption was, the benefits of financial prudence would be sweeping through the British economy. In practice, however, the government failed to implement the controversial but at least novel monetarist policies to which it was committed with anything like the vigour necessary to give them a sporting chance. So the chances are high that the British Treasury will need further reductions of public expenditure in the spring. The research councils are certain to catch its eye.

Two particular arguments will come up, the first of which is the doctrine of equal misery, thoughtlessly used a year ago as the excuse for reducing public support for British universities by 8.5 per cent over three years. In a memorable display of insouciance, the then Secretary of State for Education and Science told the House of Commons that all public institutions must expect to share the burden of financial sacrifice. He was echoed last Wednesday in the House of Commons by his successor, Sir Keith Joseph. Ironically, if the cost of the enforced redundancies among academics now in prospect falls on the government (and there is no other way in which it can be met), the decisions that have been made will not constitute economies at all. The danger now is that the reduction of support for the universities will be used as an argument for cutting back on the budgets of the research councils. For if the research councils exist in part to support academic research, and if the number of academics is to be reduced, it will be argued that research council budgets can be correspondingly reduced.

That argument is a nonsense which betrays a facile ignorance of the upheaval now under way in British universities. Ostensibly at least, the selective allocation of funds by the University Grants Committee in the summer involved an assessment of individual universities' performance in research. At least in theory, casualties among university departments in the next few years are likely to be heaviest among those with an indifferent record in research. On this assumption, the university departments left substantially intact will be just as much in need of research support in the years ahead as in the past. And if the talents of able academic researchers left stranded in moribund departments are not to be wasted (see *Nature* 19 November, p.198), the research councils will also need funds to help people migrate to centres where promising research can be carried through. What this implies is that the reduction of public subvention for the universities is entirely irrelevant to the needs of the research councils. And any substantial reduction of the councils' capacity

to support academic research will further endanger the health of the British academic research enterprise, already well below par.

Although the budgets of the research councils have been to some extent protected since stagnation set in a decade ago, the protection is far from complete. The cash limits laid down for the present financial year have not adequately compensated for inflation. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of what the research councils can afford to spend in universities is being steadily undermined. With the collapse of the dual support system, by which universities are supposed to provide basic research facilities out of their own funds, the research councils are willy-nilly having to dip into their own pockets for that purpose. At the same time, they are finding that they can no longer fund all the research proposals of high quality that come their way. The Medical Research Council now says so explicitly. But even the pattern of grant applications in the past few years, when the research councils have congratulated themselves that good proposals have been adequately funded, has probably been misleading. Academic research groups, which are not foolish, have for many years been trimming their ambitions to the public knowledge of what the research councils can and will support. The knowledge that proposals that are too ambitious are unlikely to succeed has already contributed to the despondency in the British research community.

Even as things are, the condition of the British academic research enterprise gives the lie to the government's claim that research has hitherto been protected. As the infrastructure is eroded, the research councils are compelled to operate on ever thinner ice. Already they have been forced to postpone plans that would in normal times have been considered vitally important — the Science and Engineering Research Council, for example, has just put off a plan to break new ground in the fashionable field of molecular electronics. The danger now is that the collapse of morale among academic researchers will be accentuated by the real decline of resources to support their work. The result, quite quickly, could be catastrophic. Even as things are, the government could find that the lack of enterprise and innovation that has brought Britain to its present economic plight will persist even when the long recession comes to an end. To think of further reductions of the research councils' budgets is to behave as if the chance of economic recovery has now vanished. If that is what the government believes, it should say so.

Hunger strike's damage

Andrei Sakharov is on hunger strike. Is he right?

Two years of exile in the city of Gork'ii would be enough to drive anybody to despair. So it is forgivable that even courageous spirits such as Andrei Sakharov and his wife Yelena have embarked on a hunger strike to persuade the Soviet government to agree that their son's fiancée, Liza Alexeyeva, should be allowed to join her future husband in the United States. One snag, as the Sakharovs must know, is that their isolation in a remote part of the Soviet Union to which foreign visitors are not allowed will blunt the effect of their protest. Gork'ii is not, after all, Belfast, where the British government obligingly answered questions from the press about the slow progress towards death of the Irish republicans who fatally starved themselves earlier in the