Council, on the other hand, although enjoined to support academic research, has for the past decade been flirting with ways of making university research more directly relevant to British industry. On the grounds that all of the councils have a finger in the university pie, their funds are channelled through the Department of Education and Science, but the total sum available each year has for the past decade been divided between the various councils on the recommendation of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. Even when this mechanism was established, in the wake of the Rothschild reorganization in 1971, it was feared that the board, on which the executive officers of the research councils are necessarily influential, would become an arid device for sharing out funds in such a way as not to give too much offence. So it has turned out.

The advisory board is thus an obvious candidate for change. But how? There is much to be said for the recipe offered last November by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology — appoint a full-time chairman, give him (or her) a small staff and require the board to comment on the policy questions that now go largely by default. Under such an arrangement, the chairman of the board would become what the Department of Education and Science now conspicuously lacks — a chief scientist of a kind. These proposals have the advantage that they could be put into effect without much trouble. They would also be improvements. The government should listen to what the House of Lords has said, and quickly.

There are, however, snags. The reform of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils along the lines suggested by the House of Lords committee would leave untouched the habitual secrecy of advisory bodies working for British government departments. The theory is simple; advisory bodies exist to give advice which ministers may, at their pleasure, decline. And, the argument goes, it would be unseemly, cramping and politically irksome if the rejection by a minister of an advisory committee's advice were publicly advertised. But this is precisely what has happened with this year's advice on the research council budgets. The decision that the budget of the Social Science Research Council should be reduced by £1.1 million (just over 5 per cent) was taken by Sir Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, in flat contradiction of the recommendation of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. No explanation has been given, so that there is no way of telling whether the minister's fiat reflects the fashionable animus against the social sciences or whether there were — as there might well have been — more substantial grounds for his decision. Whatever the truth, the minister is likely to be more seriously damaged by the gossip that will now flourish than he would have been by an open discussion of his reasons. Secrecy, it seems, hurts even those whom it is intended to protect.

The case of the Social Science Research Council illustrates another weakness of the present system. The council was set up nearly twenty years ago to foster academic research in the social sciences. Throughout that period, it has struggled hard to establish academic centres of excellence in the face of open hostility from its enemies and, more disarming, the wayward kookiness of some of its friends. On the grounds of youth, it was exempted from Lord Rothschild's recommendation in 1971 that government departments should pay for the cost of applied research supported by the research councils. Since then, the Social Science Research Council has been complaining that government departments are too fond of stealing its clothes by commissioning basic research from their own resources. Now, ironically, there is to be another inquiry by Lord Rothschild into the application of the customer–contractor principle in this field; one result may be to reconcile the advisory board with its minister.

What will remain undecided are the questions that the advisory board should have had the wit to take up several years ago — is a research council the best mechanism for fostering the social sciences? what criteria of excellence make sense? and what, in any case, is to be made of the peculiarly British sneer that what are called the social sciences are not science? It is easy to understand why the advisory board would have shrunk from such an investigation; if the precedent were established that the constitution of the newest research council might be questioned, who could then ensure that the well-established councils were free from scrutiny? The advisory board, in other words, is undermined by backscratching which is then strengthened by the convention of secrecy.

The habit of secrecy is not merely damaging to all those concerned but also inappropriate. Over the years, the research councils have (to their credit) established a remarkable sense of trust with their customers in the universities. In Britain as elsewhere, the peer review of research proposals has created a sense that substantial parts of their budgets are spent by the scientific community, not by career officials. Some of the councils have also developed a knack of putting controversial ideas into circulation before they are finally decided. But the questions that the advisory board should be tackling — the place of social science, the health (or sickness) of the dual support system, the success (or otherwise) of the University Grants Committee's designated courses in engineering education and so on — are also questions that cannot be settled convincingly by a small group of people, however appointed.

The lessons for the government are clear. The advisory board should be strengthened along the lines suggested by the House of Lords and, in the process, the dominant influence of the research councils should be deliberately weakened but not abolished. Then, some device must be found for making the advisory board a more public body, able at least to advertise the issues on its agenda and ideally compelled to publish not less than once a year a reasoned account of what it has been doing. There is no substantial danger that in the process the British Constitution would be undermined or the freedom of ministers compromised. On the contrary, ministers would be less at risk than at present of having to make up their minds without the benefit of even half-baked advice.

Not president perpetual

Dr Philip Handler, who died last week served the US National Academy of Sciences well.

Being President of the United States is a relatively simple job; power and patronage help to bring to heel unwilling cabinet colleagues and even members of the Congress. Presidents of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington enjoy no such benefits. Even though elected, they must continually reassert their authority among their electors, many of whom declare that they could do the job just as well if only they chose to spend their time in such a demeaning way. One measure of Dr Philip Handler's achievement in this office is that during his twelve-year stint at the academy, which ended last June, he was twice re-elected.

A large part of the explanation is that he was an articulate man; he could make fine speeches but also talk his way out of trouble. He was also courageous. He fought the extremists among the environmentalists when many others thought it prudent to keep their heads down. He fought Congress on several occasions, not only about the scale of support for research but over occasional threats of interference. Handler's early years at the academy saw the rapid growth of its secular activity — producing reports on topical issues, sometimes important and sometimes trivial — whereafter he had to fight the committees for the right to ensure that their reports were properly reviewed before publication. Not all his battles were successes. The campaign to finance the purchase of Einstein's statue now in the academy's front garden might have been successful if the statue had been better.

Inevitably, continual battles take a toll. Handler, always an iconoclast, occasionally seemed to be oversensitive to criticism. Latterly, he was concerned to know what he would do on leaving the academy and, more recently, was embrittled by his largely secret knowledge of his mortal illness. He will, however, be remembered well, not merely for his wit and eloquence but for having rescued the academy from its earlier spells of idiosyncratic and then indolent leadership — and for ensuring that it is no longer simply an academy.

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