

interest in the health of research, then let it have an extra civil servant to strengthen its secretariat. And if the Advisory Council for Applied Research and Development has failed to take a broad look at its field of interest, why not simply broaden its terms of reference and strengthen its secretariat? In thus rejecting the House of Lords case for a central body to oversee "the whole of scientific endeavour", the government laconically accepts that the present divisions of responsibility will continue.

The few positive parts of the government's response are that Dr Robin Nicholson, the member of the Cabinet Office with responsibility for science and technology should now (not before time) have half a dozen people to help him, that he will become the chairman of a new committee composed of chief scientists from government departments and that there will be an internal but formal annual review of government research based on documents supplied by the separate ministries. This proposal falls short of the House of Lords demand that these reviews should be made public and, even more seriously, does not of itself meet the need that there should be an opportunity for some person or group acting on behalf of the government as a whole to ask searching questions about research of the constitutionally autonomous ministries of which the British government consists. On the face of what the government proposes, there will even now be no regular opportunity for demanding that the Department of Education, in its scramble to save money on higher education, should not further undercut the dual-support system on which the Prime Minister's pledge to "protect" basic research depends, or that the agriculture ministry should make sure that cyanide kills badgers humanely before embarking on its widespread use.

Defence research will similarly remain a rogue elephant, dominating the British government's spending on research and development but designed (with perfect constitutional propriety) primarily to meet the needs of the armed services, and with hardly a thought for industry. The government is hoping that the ubiquitous Dr Nicholson and his helpers (still to be found) will be able to put a foot in this door by his intended membership of two important defence research committees. The puzzle is that the government has not seized this opportunity to devise machinery more fully to integrate defence research with the rest of what it does. People in Whitehall set great store by committee membership, and certainly to be excluded from a key committee is to have no influence of any kind over its affairs. But Whitehall also knows that a lone voice on a committee can be silenced or, worse, made to seem to acquiesce. Especially when (as now) the people principally concerned are more receptive than ever to the notion that the benefits of defence research should be deliberately cultivated, this is an opportunity lost.

The central issue between the British government and the House of Lords, however, is on the question whether the research and development enterprise should be politically represented. The House of Lords Select Committee wanted to go back to an arrangement abolished in the 1960s under which the holder of one of the non-executive posts in the British Cabinet would be asked to hold a watching brief for science. Nobody in Britain wants a science minister on the French or German pattern, and indeed there is much to be said for sticking to the present assumption, sanctified by Lord Rothschild in 1971, that the usefulness of public science is enhanced if ministries individually are persuaded to take research and development seriously. Yet as things are, and because of the way that British governments function, the vital task of coordination is bound to be neglected. So it has proved with badgers, acid rain and the dual-support system. The value of a part-time minister is that only such a person can intervene in the British political process at that level at which the doctrine of ministerial independence is subsumed in the more general doctrine of the collective responsibility of cabinet members. The government in its reply to the House of Lords seems deliberately to have missed this point (as also in its rejection of the proposal that a chief scientist should be appointed to the Department of Education and Science with the remark that there are already civil servants to look after the teaching of science in the schools). The manner of its rejection of the proposal is two-fold: first, the

committee-engineering proposed should obviate the need for a nominated minister but, second, there is such a person already in the person of the Prime Minister (who has a degree in chemistry), who has now reaffirmed her interest in science and technology. Should not the House of Commons put her to the test?

Crunch in West Germany

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft may have to break with convention if the squeeze continues.

There is nothing like uncertainty to induce compliance with unpalatable circumstances. This is the simplest explanation for the mood of resignation, not revolt, in which the annual meeting of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) in Bonn last week received the news that, for the first time since the Second World War, its fund (the only fund) for making grants to academic researchers is about to shrink in real terms. (The total budget will increase by four per cent to DM850 million, but inflation is running at six per cent.) The uncertainties that seem to have induced this state of affairs are of two kinds — general concern about the health of an economy which, although still the strongest in Western Europe, is not easily able to hold a candle to Japan, and more immediate anxiety that erosion of the political support for the Bonn coalition government will continue.

But why think of complaining about a reduction of resources that amounts to a mere two per cent? The simple truth is that there are many circumstances in which university research groups will be more seriously affected. In West Germany, the subvention of university research by DFG accounts for a comparatively small part, perhaps only a fifth, of the total cost of university research. The remainder is provided directly by the *Länder* governments, many of which are short of funds because of the recession and are taking the knife to their universities as a consequence. After several years in which university laboratories have been ill-provided with equipment, and with the now high cost of renewal and replacement, it is inevitable that DFG should be spending a growing proportion of its shrinking funds on material that would previously have been provided on the regular budgets of universities. The result is a painful squeeze on the most important of all DFG's functions — short-term support for bright young people with a contribution to make to research. No wonder that Professor Eugen Seibold, the president, was telling DFG last week that it could not stomach another year of this.

Seibold will, however, be lucky if the politicians have the time to listen. Moreover, there is little chance that economic circumstances will have changed sufficiently by the last quarter of this year for the federal government to draft a markedly better budget. So it is high time that some serious thought was given to the simple question whether the present balance between the different sources of support for academic research can possibly be for the best in the best of all possible worlds? There are three sources of support for academic research in West Germany — the *Länder* governments, DFG and the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft. The first two support research *in situ*, the third in constitutionally and sometimes even geographically separate institutes. Even in the abstract, there is a case for holding that DFG should grow at the expense of its two partners in this enterprise. The *Länder* governments are less able to discriminate between the good and the less good projects than they might be, and in any case tend to become committed to people or departments for years on end. And however hard it tries to do otherwise, the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft is capable of setting up academic laboratories that are also ivory towers. The trouble is, of course, that the *Länder* governments are collectively more powerful than even the federal government, while the more or less even balance between DFG and the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft in the past heady decade of prosperity is a mark of able people's mutual respect. What matters about spending money, however, is that it should be spent by those who spend it best. (The parable of the talents refers.) If the next DFG budget also embodies a reduction, Professor Seibold may have to speak up and speak out.