

UK research councils

Another inquiry under way

BRITISH support for civil science is destined for yet another shake-up. The British Government has commissioned a one-man inquiry into the organization of the five research councils, which between them spend more than £500 million a year on a blend of academic and applied research at British universities and research institutes.

The inquiry will be carried out by Sir Ronald Mason, for five years until the end of 1982 Chief Scientific Adviser at the Ministry of Defence, and who has now returned to the University of Sussex as professor of chemistry. Comparisons between the Mason study and that carried out in 1971 by Lord Rothschild are inevitable. Indeed, part of the objective of the new inquiry is to assess the working during the past decade of the Rothschild prescription, the most recent major upheaval in the organization of British civil science.

Rothschild's report (see *Nature* 234, 169; 1971) introduced two major innovations. The more contentious was the principle



Sir Ronald Mason — in Rothschild's footsteps. that in respect of applied research, the titularly autonomous research councils should be regarded as research contractors working at the behest of ministries, themselves proxies for taxpayers, the ultimate "customers". As a result, parts of the budgets of the agricultural, medical and environment councils were formally transferred to the ministries most directly concerned. This stimulated a rare wave of public protest by research councils and members of the research establishment, provoked in part by the government's suppression of a rival prescription drawn up by Sir Frederick Dainton until the Rothschild review had been completed.

A second important feature of the Rothschild remedy was that government departments should appoint chief scientists competent to commission research from the councils and also to make judgements about the remainder of a ministry's research programme. The opinion that this part of the recipe has not functioned well is common. Most chief scientists have been short-term incumbents, while the agriculture ministry has even replaced one senior

appointment by two at a more junior level.

The scope of the Mason inquiry is as broad as Rothschild's, and its recommendations are also likely to affect the constitution of the research councils individually. The setting up of the Mason inquiry immediately on the heels of last week's publication of the major study of the relationship between universities and research councils (see *Nature* 4 August, p.383) suggests that the government, having been presented with some general principles, now wants action — and perhaps economies as well. But the new development will also be interpreted as a sign of the government's impatience with the results of that inquiry.

The timing of the inquiry is significant. Mason has been asked to report with recommendations by October, when there will still be time for the Advisory Board for the Research Councils to draw up recommendations for research council budgets during 1984-85 on assumptions which differ from those on which it is at present functioning, the continuation of the *status quo*.

Of the five research councils, the Natural Environment Research Council is probably in present circumstances the most vulnerable. Out of a budget of £86 million (in the year 1981-82), the council raised £82 million by means of research commissions from six departments of the British Government and from the European Community.

The council's spending on direct support for university research amounted to only £8 million, although the council also supports research ships and other facilities used by university researchers. Its most conspicuous single item of consumption is the Institute of Geological Sciences, which cost £28 million last financial year. Last week's report from the Morris committee suggested that the relationship between the institute and the universities should be "reviewed", which is polite language for suggesting that changes are necessary. Among many geologists, the existence of the institute is regarded as an impediment to the provision of adequate research support through other channels, such as the Science and Engineering Research Council.

As always on these occasions, the Agricultural Research Council can also look forward to an uncomfortable few weeks. A still unpublished report on the council precipitated the Rothschild inquiry more than a decade ago, the council was told last year that its real budget would be reduced from 1984-85 and it has a large proportion of its research (52 per cent) commissioned by a single source — the Ministry of Agriculture with the connivance of the agriculture parts of the administrations of Scotland and Ulster.

Absorption of the research council into

the ministry is certain to be one of the options considered in the Mason inquiry, and the same considerations are likely to be raised in respect of the Medical Research Council, whose National Institute for Medical Research was "fingering" in last week's report and which has not been forgiven for having persuaded the Department of Health to relinquish direct control over its "Rothschild money", largely by making a monkey of the chief scientist system.

The joker in the pack now to be reshuffled is the Department of Industry, whose formal connection with the research councils and universities is negligible, but which has been increasingly put forward in recent months as a source of opinion and financial resources. A more formal connection with the Science and Engineering Research Council (to which Rothschild's customer-contractor principle was not at the outset applied) could be on the cards.

Paradoxically, the research council most likely to escape untouched from the new review is that most complained of by the government in the past few years — the Social Science Research Council. Government criticism led to a formal review last year by Lord Rothschild which, among other things, recommended that the council could be left alone for the next three years. It seems improbable that Mason will defy this edict.

John Maddox

Krakatoa still active

THE volcano on the island of Krakatoa, still violently active today. In August 1883 the island was devastated and huge tidal waves were formed. This event, in which 36,000 people were killed, is commemorated in a centenary exhibition at the British Museum (Natural History) in London, running from 26 August to 25 October. □