UK civil science

Mason report proposes yet more reform

THE British preoccupation with the administration of publicly supported civil research continues. Sir Ronald Mason, appointed in August to carry out a one-man inquiry into the working of the relationship between British government departments and the titularly autonomous research councils (see *Nature* 11 August, p.476), this week delivered the firm opinion that the departments are inept at telling what research they need. Many of those who opposed the Rothschild reorganization of research in 1971, which among other things established that government departments should behave as "customers", commissioning research from "contractors" represented by the research councils, will now be saying "We told you so".

The Mason inquiry was commissioned by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC), whose chief function is annually to recommend to the Department of Education and Science the partition of the budget available for civil science between the five research councils. Mason has ensured a sympathetic reception from his sponsor by urging that the advisory board should have more authority and responsibility. His overall objective is to make the Rothschild principle function more effectively, not to abandon it.

Mason's chief complaint about the working of the Rothschild system is that it appears to have made little difference in the pattern of departmentally supported research except to diminish support for "strategic" research. But departments which are not the mainstay of single research councils (as is the agriculture ministry for the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), for example), have since 1977 taken advantage of the Rothschild prescription to reduce their total support for research council work by about a quarter, from £26.6 million to £19.9 million (in 1982-83 prices).

The report of the inquiry also points out that all government departments have declined to follow the Rothschild prescription that something like 10 per cent of the cost of research commissioned from research councils should be regarded as a surcharge to support cognate strategic research — the agriculture departments on the basis that funds for the purchase of commissioned research with ARC has never exceeded 55 per cent of the council's total budget, compared with the 70 per cent transfer originally recommended.

What has gone wrong? The Mason report says that there is no reason to doubt the validity of the Rothschild recipe, but that the Rothschild proposals have not

been fully implemented. In particular, government departments have not functioned in relation to the research councils as "informed partners" — but nevertheless there has been an increase in the bureaucracy and in administrative costs of the kind that led, three years ago, to the decision that the Department of Health should hand back its "Rothschild money" to the Medical Research Council (MRC).

Not all the fault lies in Whitehall, however. Mason points out that the research councils are less flexible than they should be in accepting research contracts because they employ most scientists on terms based on those common in the scientific civil service, in which job security until retirement age is the general rule. Mason recommends that the research councils might usefully "examine" this practice, saying that its abandonment would give the research councils more flexibility and a stronger flow of new entrants to their research laboratories.

Apparently in passing, but pointedly, the Mason report says that both ARC and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) should worry about the large proportion of their research carried out in their own laboratories, and says that at many of these institutions there is a need for "reorientation, amalgamation, privatization or transfer to an appropriate government department".

Mason's recipe for reform, that ABRC itself should be given more influence, derives from his suggestion that govern-

ment departments should not waste further effort on building up an infrastructure for providing intelligent advice on research programmes but that, instead, they should recruit part-time scientific advisers from among people of "stature". Then it would be possible for ABRC to function as a means of holding the ring between conflicting research needs, to which end it should have "a more full-time chairman" and an adequate secretariat. One of the functions of such a strengthened board would be to sanctify agreements between departments and research councils on substantial research programmes, whereupon the partner council would be allowed to get on with the work under supervision from the board.

Mason also raises the possibility of closer liaison between ABRC and the British Government's other chief source of advice on civil science, the Advisory Council on Applied Research and Development. More cross-membership is a must, even a merger of the two committees should not be ruled out. With that suggestion, Mason (whose report is nowhere over-respectful of his terms of reference) has come as close as he might have thought it prudent to questioning the government's firm decision a year ago that there should not be a government department concerned with research and development in both science and technology.

Although formally a report to ABRC, most of Mason's recommendations are in reality addressed to government departments and even the cabinet. Almost inevitably, however, his comments on NERC and ARC will influence the outcome of the ABRC recommendations on the division of the annual science budget, due to be published before the end of the year.

John Maddox

Ocean research out?

As a result of government pressure for increased efficiency, the UK Institute of Oceanographic Sciences (IOS) faces the possible closure of its sites at Taunton, Devon, and Bidston, near Liverpool, and the merger of the two institutes in new buildings near the present head office at Wormley in Surrey. This is one of the more severe options being costed by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), which runs the institute. The proposals will be assessed by the council at its meeting early in December.

The annual expenditure of IOS is about £2.3 million net. In 1982-83, about £4.3 million worth of research was commissioned by government departments. According to the director, Dr A.S. Laughton, the level of government commissions has held up quite well (unlike that in other areas supported by NERC) but the time-scales over which forward

planning is possible within such programmes has decreased. As a result of NERC's drive for staff reduction, IOS is losing more than 3 per cent of its staff each year through natural wastage.

Of the three institutes within IOS, Wormley is by far the largest, with a staff of about 250 and with research programmes spanning physical, chemical and biological oceanography and geology. Taunton and Bidston (with about 50 and 70 staff respectively) work in more applied areas such as tidal computations (Bidston) and applied wave research and sedimentation (Taunton).

None of the options now being considered by NERC includes deliberate cessation of these activities, but there are many potential difficulties. For example, the tidal computation group at Bidston employs part-time members of staff who are both hard to replace and unlikely to want to move to the more expensive "gin and tonic" belt of Surrey.

Philip Campbell