Standing up for science

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A Science Policy for Britain.

By Tam Dalyell.

Longman: 1983. Pp. 131. £5.95.

Two years ago a Select Committee of the House of Lords in Britain published a report on *Science and Government*. Among the witnesses to the Committee was the President of the Royal Society of London. He was asked how often a scientist from a government department came to the Royal Society to ask for opinions or advice or factual information. "Is it so frequent?" he was asked, "as to be a daily occurrence or so infrequent as to be a memorable occurrence?" The President's reply was: "It is perhaps nearer the latter than the former". Representatives from British universities were asked a similar question and they gave a similar response: "...there is [in universities] this undoubted reservoir of what we regard as relevant talent which is largely untapped."

The so-called "science vote", i.e. the amount of public money allocated by the government for the support of science, amounts to nearly £600 millions a year. No surprise, therefore, that politicians and civil servants get spasms of unease about the efficacy of science in the service of the nation. We are witnessing such a spasm now. *Nature* (304, 383) has reported recently the findings of a committee set up by the Advisory Board of the Research Councils to examine the deployment of their segment of the science vote; and, a week later, (*Nature*, 304, 476), it is announced that the government has commissioned Sir Ronald Mason to carry out an inquiry into the organization of the

research councils themselves.

The last spasm of unease was treated by Lord Rothschild twelve years ago. In vigorous and forthright prose he prescribed a cathartic to wash out the complexities of science policy. 'It's simple', he seemed to say. 'Treat scientists as you treat plumbers. The customer wants a job done. He pays a contractor to do the job: a principle as valid for the control of water pollution in the River Thames as it is for the control of the water closet in your bathroom.' It turned out not to be as simple as that. The 'customers' often do not know what to order; the 'contractors' have to waste time on bureaucratic chores and have to accept priorities which interrupt the continuity of research upon which the nation's future prosperity may depend. The Royal Society's verdict on the present procedures (given in its evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee) is unambiguous: "present arrangements for interdepartmental co-ordination of scientific advice to Government are much less satisfactory than those which were in operation in 1971".

So science policy is going to be featured in the news in coming months. Tam Dalyell's little tract is a useful guide to the issues that need to be discussed: the labyrinthine pathways in the Whitehall Village (Whitehall being a term-of-art for the British Civil Service); the purpose and influence of royal commissions (Michael Foot said they were "like a broody hen sitting on china eggs"); the machinery for distributing and using the science vote; the contribution made by British science to the Third World; the frustrating gap between a promising technical discovery and its exploitation by industry. Dalyell is better informed than most members of parliament about the state of science in Britain. He acquires information avidly; for years he has distilled his impressions in an admirable highbrow gossip column in the *New Scientist*. And, in contrast to scientists

who dabble in politics, Dalyell (who would willingly concede that he dabbles in science) really does understand politics.

The reader should approach *A Science Policy for Britain* as though he was going to meet Tam Dalyell for conversation over a drink. His book is not well organized or tightly argued. It is mildly party-political: material that might be considered in some future manifesto for the Labour Party. It has two welcome merits: it is clearly not a mere compilation from books and reports; Dalyell has talked to workers at the laboratory bench and he

writes from personal experience. And — as you would expect from such an experienced politician — it does not offer Utopian recipes of the kind that any civil servant would put into the waste paper basket.

Indeed, Dalyell's recipes are inevitably the most disappointing pages in the book: "To ensure that within the Science and Engineering Research Council that research in science and engineering forms a continuum"; "To find ways of improving the lot of universities and colleges. . ."; "To establish a firm framework for telecommunications research in Britain". These bland and sedative sentiments might well have come from some timid committee but they are out of character from the pen of such an articulate propagandist as Tam Dalyell. The title of his book would have been more descriptive of the content if it had been: "The need for a science policy in Britain".

The value of the book, apart from the facts in it, is (for me) the implicit disclosure of the politician's dilemma. He knows what is wrong. He has good ideas about how to make things better. But he is up against his own colleagues: "Sadly my experience of British politics leads me to the sombre conclusion that what is immediate takes precedence over and above what is important". And he is up against the impregnable defences of the civil service: its reserves of accumulated wisdom and know-how; its flair for tactical procrastination; and its obsession with confidentiality. There is an ironic reminder of this in the volume of evidence given to the House of Lords Select Committee in the report I have referred to. Look down the page numbers on the table of contents. When you come to the evidence from the secretary of the cabinet and the head of the central policy review staff you read the words "not printed".

In evidence to that same Select Committee Sir Alan Cottrell identified the basic problem that has to be solved before there can be a consistent policy for science in Britain. There are, he said, two models for governments to adopt. One, adopted by the Germans and Americans, is to "create broad conditions under which industry, by its own efforts can prosper". The other model, adopted by the French and Japanese, is much more dirigiste toward industry. The latter system — towards which British governments have in the past been inclined — demands a civil service totally different from the one we have at present. Until this issue is clear it shall not be able to design a science policy for Britain. But let us be grateful to Tam Dalyell for briefing us about the issues in this book. □

THE MINISTER'S JOB IS TO
BLIND POLITICIANS WITH
SCIENCE AND SCIENTISTS
WITH POLITICS!

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