

## British science

# Commons debate cuts little ice

LITTLE blood was drawn, and no concessions won from the British government, during last Friday's debate on science in the House of Commons. But the government had agreed to the demand of Dr Jeremy Bray, the Labour Party spokesman on science, that this year's advice from the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) should be published for the debate; it asks that the government should give the research councils £85 million extra over the next three years and wrings its hands over the rate at which younger scientists are leaving Britain.

Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, admitted at the outset that a "significant" part of the science budget has had to be spent on activities other than research, but insisted that the government has protected the budget in gross terms. This assertion was disputed by many members of parliament (MPs) during the debate (see also *Nature* 23 May, p.271), for example by Dr John Marck, who pointed out that the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) is facing cuts of £10 million this year and £20 million next.

Sir Keith also acknowledged that the number of scientists leaving Britain to work abroad where the potential rewards are greater is a matter for concern. On the other hand, he was encouraged by the increased collaboration of the research councils (which fund much of Britain's civil research) with industry in a selective and efficient way. He applauded the reduction of the research council's long-term commitments and their consequent increased flexibility and concluded that, for British science, "the way forward must be to scrutinize carefully the priorities implicit in the present balance of funding between subject areas and to consider whether some adjustments may be needed better to serve the national interest". He promised to assess ABRC's recommendations in this year's public expenditure survey, but demanded more investment in basic science from industry, particularly in engineering.

Opposition and Conservative MPs alike demanded action from the government to keep Britain in the front line of international science research. Dr Bray said that the least the government could do is to guarantee ABRC's recommended increases. His worries about the enforced drift of scientists elsewhere were epitomized by the £25 million laboratory set up by a US pharmaceutical company for Dr Leslie Iversen, formerly head of the Medical Research Council Neuropharmacology Unit at Cambridge. Dr Bray said that the work should be available to science generally and to British companies for commercial development, rather than being "pre-empted" by a US company. He

argued for the creation of a Minister of Science, and for an annual survey of industrial research and development.

Mr Ian Lloyd (Conservative) endorsed Dr Bray's proposals but had one of his own to make as well, the setting up of an Office of Technology Assessment similar to that in the United States. This independent body would serve both houses of Parliament, would be non-political and would address fundamental issues of current interest such as Mr Enoch Powell's embryo protection bill, acid rain, nuclear power and the commercial implications of biotechnology.

ABRC has set up its own working party, chaired by Professor Mathias, to examine funding of research by the private sector and to consider how it is to be extended. Its findings will be published in September of this year.

Among many other suggestions as to how the government should support sci-

ence was that of Mr Robert Jackson MP to find money from the defence research and development budget. In 1981, Britain spent \$3,000 million on civil and \$3,256 million on defence research and development. Equivalent figures for France and West Germany in the same year were \$4,370 and \$2,591; and \$6,698 and \$646, respectively. Britain could, therefore, adjust its balance of spending accordingly.

● Mr Enoch Powell used the debate to discuss once more his bill to protect human embryos. His argument was two-fold. First, he failed to find any evidence, by correspondence with this journal, scientists and doctors, that any research of the kind that would be forbidden by his bill is actually being performed, arguing that his bill should therefore be passed. Second, he suggests that those who opposed his bill were the unwitting dupes of corporate giants that stand to gain by developing contraceptive and other drugs using human embryos as experimental material. Both these arguments, as well as the appropriateness of the issue in this debate, cut little ice. **Maxine Clarke**

## US agencies

# NSF's hypothetical spree

*Washington*

THE idea of a federal Department of Science and Technology, which briefly resurfaced last winter for approximately the 100th time in the past 20 years, according to a tally by the Congressional Research Service, has appeared yet again, this time in a slightly veiled form. This week, the National Science Board, the governing body of the National Science Foundation (NSF), is to receive a study of what the agency would do if its budget were to increase by a factor of three over the next five fiscal years. The study, commissioned by NSF's director, Erich Bloch, included the assumption that as well as the extra money, NSF would take over the extramural research programmes of the Departments of Agriculture, Energy and Defense.

Although last winter's proposal rapidly fizzled out and while there is little chance that a budget-deficit-minded Congress would consider such a proposal even if it were submitted, the NSF study makes clear that those in high places would like a major reorganization of US science agencies.

One often-discussed idea, less drastic than consolidating all the science agencies into a single cabinet-level department, is a merger of NSF and the National Bureau of Standards, as proposed by the Reagan administration in 1983 as part of a plan to replace the Department of Commerce with a Department of International Trade and Industry. The proposal of last winter (in a study by the Presidential Commission on Industrial Competitiveness), took that as a starting point; the commission also

considered adding in the research portions of the Department of Energy, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Among the supporters of a cabinet-level department at that time was George Keyworth, the president's science adviser. And Roland Schmitt, the president of the National Science Board (and vice-president for corporate research and development at General Electric) said in a talk last winter at George Washington University that while he was unsure whether a Department of Science and Technology was the answer, the present organization of science agencies needed to be reexamined in the light of a failure to provide adequate support for the "science base" in the country. Schmitt said that NSF had traditionally supplied this base, which he said included the training of new scientists and engineers as well as research on new concepts too risky for industry to invest in, with help from the "mission agencies".

But now, he said, the mission agencies had become too involved with their missions to keep up their end. "Maybe what we need is not a Department of Science and Technology but an NSF that is three times the size of the present one", said Schmitt.

Last week, however, NSF officials denied that the study ordered by Bloch was anything more than an "intellectual exercise" to identify research priorities and said that NSF had no wish to take over the research responsibilities of other agencies. **Stephen Budiansky**