

predictably) as a courageous president; he has told off his opposite number in Moscow for the Soviet treatment of Sakharov and, more recently (see p.399), the organizers of next year's archaeological congress at Southampton for their indifference to the principles of freedom in science. That the administration of the society has been refreshingly improved during his tenure of office is an unexpected bonus. He is affectionately forgiven for his intervention on behalf of the British Museum (Natural History) — which should find itself a better name — in its dispute with *Nature* over the public presentation of evolution (see *Nature* 291, 373; 1981).

Huxley's successor, Sir George Porter, will almost certainly do as well. His record in research is similarly distinguished (with a Nobel Prize, while they last, a qualification for the job among other things), but he also has a foot in another camp, the popularization of science. Especially as director of the Royal Institution (Humphry Davy's home for Michael Faraday), Porter has done more than most working professionals to make sure that the world at large should have a better understanding of why science is important. It is no surprise that he should have said at the weekend that, for the next two or three years, the public understanding of science will be one of the Royal Society's preoccupations. There is a great deal of enlightenment to be effected. Everybody will hope that the new president can work a little wonder.

The obvious difficulty is that this is only part of the battle that needs to be fought. Logic would suggest that if the British electorate were better informed about the excitement of what happens in laboratories, it would sense the potential economic as well as cultural value of what is called research and instruct their elected representatives accordingly; and the consequence of that, the argument goes, is that British governments would no longer be able to deal with budgets for research as if they were any old kind of public spending. Unfortunately, in this as in other fields, logic is an inadequate guarantor of good sense, and is in any case slow to work its way through the electoral system. And although most British scientists will now say that their troubles stem from the cuts which there have been in their budgets, that is only half the truth. It matters at least as much that the system of research organizations spending what funds there are has been slow to accommodate itself to the changing environment. The simple consequence has been that potentially creative people have too often allowed themselves to be persuaded that they cannot hope to accomplish much.

In these depressing circumstances, the most urgent need of the British research enterprise is for leadership. It will help a great deal if researchers discover the Royal Society to be hard at work instructing people at large that science is a worthwhile enterprise, but there is more that needs doing. In particular, there is a need that some organization that stands for science, but which also understands the government's need to spend less, should more openly function as an informed critic of mismanagement of the kind that has marked the past few years. Who better than the Royal Society?

There are three stock explanations, one of which is that the Royal Society depends on public funds for most of its support, another that the society delivers its opinions confidentially, to those (in the government and elsewhere) who must act on them and, third, that a society composed of individuals elected for their academic distinction cannot be expected to have what might be called a corporate view. There is something in each of these arguments. It is a particular embarrassment that the Royal Society should both be dependent on the Advisory Board for the Research Councils for its own funds and an *ex officio* member of the same committee, no doubt because of the potential value of its candour. The view that the giving of advice through private channels inhibits public criticism is less cogent. And while it would probably be impossible to win an agreed view by the Royal Society's members on, say, the best way to finance the British Broadcasting Corporation or even the wisdom of replacing *Polaris* by Trident submarines, there is every chance that they would unite behind a measured and public criticism of

government policy towards British science in the past five (or even fifteen) years. What seems not to be understood is the degree to which morale in the laboratories would be stiffened by the emergence of an influential monitor of the present course of black events. It is possible that Sir George Porter has just such a plan hidden behind the slogan of public understanding. Now, at least, the Royal Society has a policy unit that could be the source of the analysis needed to sustain such a role. Why not take it up? There is much to be gained and, now, not much to be lost. □

Broadcasting in chaos

The British government has encouraged a sense of being mean that now extends to the BBC.

LIKE public policy on strategic arms, public policy on broadcasting is also an issue with which the technical community must grapple. The simplest reason is simply given; without the technology, there would be no issue, so that the innovators have a continuing responsibility. The more complicated but more interesting reason is that the innovators (or the inheritors) have a proper self-interest in the use made of the technology; will it, they may ask, further our interest that there may be more discovery and innovation? Those who may be sympathetic to this notion should pay some attention to what is happening to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), certainly the best broadcasting organization in the world.

The BBC is constitutionally a public corporation, legally given (by charter) the right to function as if it were a corporation (or joint-stock company, as the Victorians would have said) but also saddled with the responsibility to broadcast material that gives neither personal nor political offence. But unlike other corporations, the BBC raises the funds it needs to keep on the air by means of an annual payment by those who own television and radio sets. This arrangement, conceived of in the 1920s, when television had not been invented, and when even the ownership of a radio receiver was a privilege, persists to the embarrassment of both the BBC (which needs the money) and the British government (which must periodically sanction an increase in the licence fee as, grudgingly, it did earlier this year).

So should not the market play a more prominent part in matching public expectations of broadcasting organizations to what the broadcasters provide? Especially because it has not escaped public attention that most broadcasting organizations are financed on a commercial basis, selling part of the time for which their audiences are prepared to listen to outsiders with other messages to impart, should not the BBC also sell time to advertisers? It would be unjust to the present British government to complain that it has insisted that this question should be answered. It has merely created the climate in which the question cannot be avoided.

The outcome is a committee under Professor Alan Peacock now brooding on the future financing of the BBC. Last week, the committee organized a meeting at which people whose views are well known repeated them for a gathering of others whose views are equally well known. (There were journalists in attendance, in the gallery.) The most radical (and the best) of the free-market solutions to the government's problem about the BBC (due to Mr Peter Jay, once British ambassador in Washington) is that people should pay for what they receive from among what is broadcast as they do for telephone calls. The trouble is that that is also politically unworkable. Most voters who now say that they would prefer that the BBC should take advertising than that the licence fee should be increased might turn nasty if they thought they would have to pay by the minute not the year. Yet the BBC must somehow be taken off the backs of successive British governments, all of which have been prepared to take credit for its quality while resenting the need to approve new licence fees. Why not turn the corporation into a public foundation which, unlike the Public Broadcasting Service in the United States, would be financed by an endowment, not an annual subvention? □