

Revolution needed to exploit British science

- State of science has not improved in 5 years
- Morale of scientific community at low ebb

London

BRITISH science and technology must be given more political clout and the scientific community rescued from a system that has created turmoil and frustration. A minister of cabinet rank with a brief to control Britain's scientific research and development effort and a council, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, to promote that effort are two of the key measures which will make the rescue possible. These are the conclusions of a study entitled *Civil Research and Development* conducted by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology.

The survey, which has amassed evidence from British industry and science, claims that the morale of the country's scientific community is at an all-time low and that pessimism in industry is commonplace.

The report, from a subcommittee of the Select Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Sheffield, is scathing in its criticism of Britain's poor scientific performance, laying the blame at the doors of government and industry. It is equally unhappy about the performance of the research councils and the rivalry between them.

The report concludes: "During the last five years, however, the general state of science and technology in the United Kingdom has not improved. In some areas it has even become worse. In spite of the valiant efforts of individuals to make the present system work, and in spite of a few success stories in branches of science and technology, the overall picture conveys an impression of turmoil and frustration."

The fortunes of science can only be reversed, say the Lords, if it is given a higher political profile with the caucus of that power being centred within the Cabinet Office, the home-designate of the secretariat of a proposed 'Council on Science and Technology'. One primary source of counsel to government on science and technology, the Advisory Council for Applied Research and Development will be "absorbed" within the new council.

A fresh start is needed, say the Lords. But the activities of the research councils need better co-ordination so that they can exercise 'strong management and clear decisions' about scientific priorities. To that end, the Advisory Board for the Research Councils must play a more significant management role, claim the Lords, although they shy from recommending the abolition of the research councils.

They have endorsed a more subtle approach. They conclude: "The Committee do not recommend the establishment of a single Research Council, as some witnesses advocated, but favour harmonised working practices and evolutionary progress which might lead to the eventual unification of the Councils."

The commonly held view of those giving evidence to the Lords committee was that



Lord Sheffield — scathing criticisms.

too much government research and development money is channelled into defence, which echoes the conclusions of recent studies on British government investment in science.

The change in Britain's scientific fortunes, the study concludes, will require more commissioning of government research and development from the private sector and the imposition of a 10 per cent surcharge on top of the cost of such contracts for use at 'the discretion of the laboratories carrying out the research'. An increase in the science budget would also be necessary to ensure that commitments to international projects are fulfilled. Legislation should also be introduced requiring companies to disclose levels of research and development expenditure.

"The academic community, subjected to financial restraints and stagnant recruitment, is held back from breaking new ground or enthusing its pupils. A brain drain among the best graduates is again evident." But the dominant role to be played by the Cabinet Office, if the Lords' blueprint were to be endorsed by government, would inevitably strip many, like the research councils, of much of the power they now enjoy.

Bill Johnstone

EMBO fellowships up

THE European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO) won approval from member governments at its December council meeting to increase the number of long-term (2–3-year) fellowships awarded annually from 160 to 190–199 by 1991. □

CERN advance payments

SWITZERLAND has promised to pay its contributions to the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN) near Geneva in advance for the next "several years". This generosity and that of other unnamed countries will enable CERN to overcome a "cash-flow problem" that has arisen in the building of its next accelerator, the large electron–positron ring LEP. □

Sizewell report finished

OFFICIALS and ministers at the British Department of Energy await the arrival in about two weeks of the remaining sections of the study into a proposed new nuclear reactor to be built at Sizewell.

The bulk of the report was delivered to the Secretary of State for Energy at the beginning of last month. The 340-day inquiry closed in spring 1985, and by last October had cost more than £3.7 million. □

Victor Hugo winner

THE Victor Hugo award for 1986 will go to Leonid Brailovskii, son of Irina and Viktor Brailovskii, the Moscow mathematicians who for many years have been prominent in the organization of the Moscow Sunday Seminars, for Jewish refusenik scientists dismissed from their scientific posts after unsuccessfully applying to emigrate to Israel. The award is intended to provide a year's advanced study in France for a Soviet Jewish student who finds difficulty in studying in the Soviet Union. □

Forensic science review

BRITAIN's forensic scientists are to be the subject of a major review to assess how their service can be improved to better assist the police. The service employs about 480 scientists and 90 professional and technical staff. □

Honour for Fuchs

EAST German papers, including the party organ *Neues Deutschland*, last week paid honour to Dr Klaus Fuchs on his 75th birthday. According to the East German press agency ADN, Fuchs' wartime work on the Manhattan project took place at a time "when there was a danger that the fascists might get hold of such a dreadful weapon as the atom bomb". His imprisonment in Britain in 1950 on charges of espionage was explained as being due to his "uncompromising support for the peaceful use of nuclear energy". At 75, *Neues Deutschland* noted, Fuchs still has an active influence on Party science policy. □