

Britain, are clear, workable and an intelligent way of accommodating the interests of those who believe abortion to be an abomination within the framework of what might well become a common medical procedure. But the Polkinghorne proposals will raise problems for the British government, which has not responded with legislation in more than two years to the report of the Warnock Committee on the use of embryonic material.

The basis of the new proposals is that a living fetus (but not the associated placental material) should command the respect to which all living human beings are entitled, and that fetuses that have died should be dealt with as carefully as are cadavers. What this implies is that material from living fetuses shall not be used for research or therapeutic procedures, that there must be informed consent (primarily by the mother), that there should be a strict separation between the intended use of the fetal material and the means by which it is acquired (implying that abortions should not be timed to suit the needs of intended users and that no money should change hands) and that the use made of fetal material should be regulated by ethical committees, constituted so as not to represent only the interests of the putative users. The Polkinghorne committee rejects the argument that artificial abortion, even on therapeutic grounds, is an immoral practice so fetal material derived from such procedures is morally tainted.

These guidelines differ from those in force in Britain since 1972 in their insistence on the informed consent of the mother of a fetus and on the strict separation of the interests of the sources and users of fetal material. But these requirements are reasonable, and are entirely consonant with modern practice in other fields, genetic manipulation for example. The proposal that the transfer of fetal material should be undertaken by an intermediate authority, perhaps an elaboration of the Medical Research Council's tissue bank, is similarly the most effective way of making sure that money does not change hands improperly. Neither researchers nor clinicians have grounds for complaint at what is proposed.

The logical difficulty, for the British government, is that the Polkinghorne proposals are less stringent than those suggested for the use of human embryos in research. In particular, the Warnock committee recommended an absolute interdiction of the use of embryos more than 14 days old that would be enforced by new legislation. But it is hard to understand why the regime now proposed for the use of fetal material would not also suffice to meet the Warnock committee's proper demand that human embryos should be accorded the respect due to all living human beings. The British government, which has a commendable record of initiative in tackling the problems of how to use new techniques in biology, might usefully offer Polkinghorne as an answer to Warnock — and devote the energy liberated to securing an international convention to make the new guidelines generally applicable. In this field, as with genetic manipulation, there is too great a danger that national arrangements will be subverted by taking advantage of laxer rules elsewhere. □

British musical chairs

Britain's new minister in charge of research and higher education has some formidable tasks ahead of him.

THE British convention that ministers in charge of government departments are chosen for their versatility, not special knowledge, is nicely illustrated by last week's round of musical chairs decreed by Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister. Most attention has been paid to the demotion of Sir Geoffrey Howe, the experienced Foreign Secretary, whose continuing function in the British government will be that of Leader of the House of Commons, but the same reshuffle has translated Mr John MacGregor, last week's Secretary of State for Agriculture, into the shoes of Mr Kenneth Baker, last week's Secretary of State for Education and Science. By the standards set by his predecessor, Baker (who becomes chairman of the Conservative Party) was a success, but there is no reason why MacGregor, who is a brisk and intelligent man, should not be as successful. It is bad luck that his tenure at the agriculture ministry should have coincided with the emergence of justifiable public anxiety about the safety of the food available in British shops.

But MacGregor will find some awkward problems on his new desk, not the least of which is that provided by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC), which is again asking that more money should be spent on the support of British civil science (see page 333). He should not be surprised that, a year after his predecessor added roughly £100 million a year to the science budget for each of the next three years, he is being asked to do much the same again. The truth is that the funds now asked for are required to make good the deprivations of the past decade as well as to pay for basic research squeezed out by the extra demands made of the British research councils during the same period. But the new minister should acknowledge that his response may properly await ABRC's decision about the future organization of the research councils (see *Nature* 339, 645; 29 June 1989) and that there are some features of the British research enterprise that cannot be put right simply by the provision of extra funds.

The most ominous feature of ABRC's advice is the declaration that British research is now hampered by the scarcity of skilled people. That is no surprise, after a decade in which young people have been discouraged from regarding the prosecution of research as a rewarding career. ABRC may also have noted that matters can only worsen as greater proportions of the surviving research profession in Britain realize that they can do better for themselves by moving elsewhere in Europe. More money is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the reinvigoration of British science. MacGregor will also have to find a way of helping the British research profession win back its self-respect. He could do worse than begin with a few well-sounding speeches. □