

Revolution, but without change

The British government is again brooding about its mechanism for supporting basic science. The best solution is radical change without the appearance thereof. The danger is the inverse.

THE British government and its science establishment do not have long to decide what will be the future pattern of research support. By the end of this year, the government needs to be able to say what arrangements there will be for the financial year beginning fifteen months later; will there be five autonomous research councils, as at present, or only one? The question need never have arisen, and did so only accidentally; an urbane but otherwise impatient industrialist, Mr J. R. S. Morris, was appointed a year ago to adjudicate on a turf dispute between the research councils responsible for basic science and medical research (the disputed ground was biotechnology), but the terms of reference were so appropriately genteel that Morris (he had four colleagues as well) was virtually free to advise on what he chose.

It is no surprise that Morris discovered that science is a seamless web, that all partitions of science are bound to be illogical and that it would be better to lump everything together under one larger research council with a universal remit to support research. But the Morris report is more cogent than that. These days, there is a surprising concentration of research at the boundaries between the interests of the five research councils. This is not mere accident, the way an ancient cookie crumbles, but a sign that, beneath often forbidding exteriors, all the research councils compete more vigorously with others than with themselves. Operationally, an interesting interdisciplinary research proposal is bound to seem more appealing than another written straight down the middle of a well-trodden road. The case for returning to a less adventitious pattern is strong, but not sufficient in itself.

The most conspicuous danger in a further reorganization of the means of supporting basic research in Britain is typified by the results of the endless fine tuning of the past quarter of a century. Every few years, some committee or another reaches the conclusion that logic requires a slightly different way of doing things, some energetic minister listens and then effects a change approximating the committee's recommendations — and a few more handfuls of creative people are prematurely put out to grass or, worse, required by their terms of appointment to work on problems that do not interest them. Surely it must now be plain that the scientific community in Britain has had as much of that as it can stomach. The Morris recipe should stand or fall by whatever extra it can offer.

The most important need in Britain now is that a few

handful of very young and very able people whose ability is widely recognized should be able quickly to accumulate the resources (cash and people) required for outstanding original work. Putting all five research councils in the same building and giving them the same letterhead will not make such a state of grace more probable. Sadly, for tidy administrators, there is no single formula under which grants for people such as these can be dispensed. But there also needs to be a measure of continuity: no purpose would be served by giving the whole research enterprise the impression that it has served its purpose. That argues for a weasel's answer to the Morris question; give all the research councils the same letterhead, but take more than 10 per cent and less than 25 per cent of their money away, to be spent quite differently. And, given the fragile condition of morale, the simplest way of effecting that is to pretend that there is to be no reorganization at all, but that the supervisory body called the Advisory Board for the Research Councils will be given executive powers (and the right to spend money) as well as the responsibility for designing the letterhead. □

Nuclear cooking-pot

Unless a major power (or several) intervenes, the Middle East will be a nuclear-weapons playground in ten years.

WHAT can there be in common between the discovery that a branch of the Italian Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL) in Atlanta, Georgia, has been issuing unauthorized letters of credit to manufacturers in the West and a TASS report that a long-range missile was fired last Thursday from a point near Jerusalem into the sea off the coast of Libya? To be truthful, nobody can tell for sure. But if the events, either together or separately, sustain some of the interpretations that are being put upon them, not merely those who live in the Middle East but the rest of us too will be much worse off.

BNL's Atlanta branch is not there to compete with indigenous banks for people's checking accounts, but to lubricate the wheels of international commerce. Letters of credit are one way of doing that; people signing contracts to buy something, but wishing to defer payment, will ask their bank to vouch that the funds will eventually be paid, whereupon the seller can often raise the money