

# No forced merger for UK research councils

- Recommendation turned down
- Closer links likely for AFRC and NERC

## London

THE five UK research councils will not after all be merged into a single National Research Council, as was recommended in the Morris report, but a pared-down Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) will instead take a more interventionist role in disputes between them, according to an announcement made this week by John MacGregor, Secretary of State for Education and Science.

From 1 April, ABRC's membership will be cut from 26 to 14 people. The restructured body will be given "a more explicit remit to improve . . . joint working among the research councils", said MacGregor. Sir David Phillips will continue as chairman, and it is understood that the heads of the research councils will play a fuller role in the workings of the board. At present, some issues are discussed by the 'independent' members of ABRC before being referred to the full board. It is hoped that this change will mean that disputes between the research councils can be thrashed out more effectively, before ABRC submits advice to the government. The full membership of the revamped ABRC should be announced within the next few weeks.

The restructuring of ABRC is proposed as a compromise solution to the problems of coordinating the activities of the research councils and the overlaps of responsibility for some subject areas, which prompted the ABRC's Morris committee report, published in July 1989. The report's recommendation to merge the research councils had met vigorous opposition, notably from within the Medical Research Council (MRC).

The advice finally submitted to MacGregor followed from a second ABRC study, involving the heads of the research councils. Phillips, in a letter accompanying the ABRC's advice, regards the restructuring of ABRC as a good compromise solution to the problems raised in the Morris report, saying "this change would go a very long way towards overcoming the coordination difficulties . . . , whilst avoiding the disruption, transitional costs and need for legislation associated with more radical proposals".

The solution also seems acceptable to some opponents of the original Morris proposals. Max Perutz, of the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology at Cambridge, a vocal critic of plans to merge the research councils, says he is "very relieved that the government has

decided against a single National Research Council. This would have been a disaster."

But some reorganization of the research councils themselves is still a possibility. MacGregor is considering proposals to improve coordination between the Agricultural and Food Research Council

## MILITARY RESEARCH

# Cold War thaw strikes home

## Boston

IN an announcement widely seen as a harbinger of the changes coming for US military research, the Draper Laboratory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, last week said it will lay off 145 employees, including 75 scientists and engineers. The laboratory is a private, military research centre affiliated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology until 1973 and relies on Defense Department contracts for 90 per cent of its budget.

Over the past seven months, the Draper Laboratory has trimmed its staff by about one fifth through layoffs or mandatory early retirement programmes. Kathleen Granchelli, a spokeswoman for the laboratory, said that some of the cutbacks had been expected in the light of the completion of much of the laboratory's work on the Trident II missile guidance system. But she added that programmes that the laboratory had hoped would supplant the Trident work have now been reduced, delayed or eliminated. And, she said, there is "no question that cuts in the defence budget will impact the lab in the future".

The cuts at Draper have been followed by an announcement of layoffs, losses and budget cuts at another Boston-based military contractor, M/A-Com Inc., a well-known defence electronics company that relies on the military for some 80 per cent of its business. M/A-Com announced an expected quarterly loss of \$115 million, and a layoff of more than ten per cent of its 6,500 employees as a result of "rapidly changing conditions in the defence electronics marketplace", says the company's chairman Thomas Vanderslice.

Robert Costello, a former Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisitions in the Reagan and Bush administrations and now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a private research organization, says that virtually all military contractors are in the same situation. But he argues that it

(AFRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). A merger between the two councils was first suggested in March 1988 by Sir Hugh Fish, then NERC chairman, and subsequently supported by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology.

But NERC has since retreated from support for a full merger, and now wishes to take over AFRC's responsibilities for environmental science. This particular option is not favoured by AFRC. Professor Bill Stewart, secretary of AFRC, says "AFRC has been consistent in the view that there would be merit in AFRC and NERC coming together".

Peter Aldhous

would be better if military research and development were protected from cuts.

Although many of the Pentagon's new weapons systems may need to be cut in the light of changing relationships with the Eastern bloc, he stresses that the military research and development establishment in the United States is a "tremendous and unique infrastructure" that has cost taxpayers "trillions" of dollars. "We had better figure out how to use it and redirect it appropriately before we destroy it."

One prospect, according to Costello, lies in 'dual-use' research which can provide both military and commercial benefits. His views are shared by many in the defence industry, including William Burnett, vice-president of the private consulting firm Charles River Associates, who specializes in advising defence contractors about weapons procurement policy. Burnett sees many military cutbacks as an "inevitable" consequence of the Defense Department's support for the development of so many expensive new weapons systems during the 1980s. "Essentially", he says, "there was no way we could continue to finance all of these projects through production at the same time." Now, he says, however, these trends have been compounded by the "hard times" besetting the Defense Department.

But not all observers are disheartened by a downturn in military spending. Columbia University professor Seymour Melman welcomes a reduction in military funding because he says the Defense Department has siphoned off talent and resources that can now be used more productively elsewhere. "The military is overwhelmed with a wave of panic" at the prospect of the "winding down of the cold war and the arms race", Melman says. The current emphasis on basic and 'dual-use' research he sees as merely "a desperate effort to try to diversify to protect their dominant position".

Seth Shulman