Welcoming Wellcome

Not every day (worse luck) is the equivalent of a new research council magicked into being.

BRITAIN'S Medical Research Council (MRC) has a distinguished reputation, most conspicuously for having supported molecular biology in its early days. MRC, of course, remains the mainstay of medical research, and of much of British biology as well. So would it not be a day of great rejoicing for British research if there were a second research council on the same scale and with similar objectives? That may be what happened last week, when the Wellcome Trust, originally founded as the charitable arm of a pharmaceutical manufacturer (called the Wellcome Foundation in Britain) cleverly used the City of London to double its annual income to more than £200 million. Indeed, the prospect of such a jump in spending on medical and biomedical research may be even better than the creation of a new research council, for foundations can, if they play their cards well, carry extra clout.

Of necessity, public research organizations such as MRC acquire unshakeable commitments, to people and to institutions, as the years go by. Although MRC's traditional policy is that research units and even institutes do not necessarily outlast their founders, it is not always easy to follow that recipe. And, indeed, it would make very little sense that international institutions such as the Laboratory of Molecular Biology at Cambridge should be closed in slavish pursuit of such a policy. But that means that increasing porportions of the funds available are tied up in fixed enterprises. Foundations, by contrast, can and should avoid fixed commitments. Their value, and their leverage, stems from the influence they can exert at the margins of research. The trick is to start good enterprises and, if necessary, to persuade even deeper pockets to take them over.

So what, in contemporary Britain, should the Wellcome Trust attempt? The plan to set up Dr John Sulston's group, now hard at work on the nucleotide sequence of the nematode, in a laboratory of its own is an excellent scheme, but responsibility for what happens when the first five years are up should rest as much with Sulston as with Wellcome. Even so, this and similar initiatives could do much to change the tone of British research. A few examples of well-founded laboratories whose occupants could demonstrate their freedom from the grinding impoverishment of the past decade or so could marvellously revive expectations in laboratories elsewhere. Is there any better way of helping younger people to make a decisive start on careers in research, of which there has been some talk since last week's announcement of the trust's sale of £2.1 billion's worth of shares in the foundation?

Wellcome's influence could thus extend far beyond the fields of science specified in its trust deed. The trust's financial acumen should also be an example to other charitable foundations, many of which are for too long trapped by sentiment into investments that yield moderate or even miserable returns. Too often, trustees take the view that loyalty to a founding benefactor requires them to stick with the investments in their original endowment. Britain's Nuffield Foundation, the richest in Britain in the 1950s, would now be much more influential if it had not hung onto its shares in its founder's ailing motor manufacturer until the government bought them up for £0.10 each just twenty years ago. The moral is that foundations must be enterprising in looking after their endowments as well as in spending whatever income rolls in. □

Infinity denied

British Telecom, the privatized British telephone monopoly, is running out of numbers, but should not worry.

HARDLY anybody loves a telephone company, which is one reason why British Telecom has been persuaded by its regulator to postpone by (at least) a year the time when most of its subscribers would be required to add an extra digit to the numbers with which they (and their acquaintances) are familiar. But the whole fracas generated by British Telecom's announcement of its intentions is a failure of logic in the face of arithmetical reality. There are plenty of shorter numbers to go around.

Britain, in round numbers, has more than 10^7 telephone subscribers, but fewer than 10^8. That means that eight-digit telephone numbers should be able to accommodate them all. But people trying to reach telephone numbers in London even from within the United Kingdom must now routinely dial ten digits. Rural locations are no more easily accessible. The mere suggestion that every British telephone number would be one digit longer quickly mobilized business groups to protest at the extra cost of printing new letterheads. Nobody seems to have bothered much about the waste of people's time entailed in dialling an extra digit for every telephone call.

The reason why British Telecom and telephone companies elsewhere are in such a muddle is that they persist in trying to endow telephone numbers with a meaning they cannot continue to enjoy. The standard illusion of telephone planners is that the first few digits of a telephone number have geographical significance — in the United States, for example, "415" means the Bay Area, or "212" New York. Second, they are trapped in the old electromechanical switching era when the digits in a telephone number were literally used sequentially as switching instructions, directing calls through one circuit or another according to their value. With stored program control now the norm in telephone exchanges, continuing efforts to associate the first few digits of a telephone number with the geographical location of the receiver (or fax machine) concerned are neither necessary nor prudent. □

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