UK White Paper criticized for failure to switch from military to civil research

London. William Waldegrave, Britain's cabinet minister responsible for science, came in for criticism from both sides of the House of Commons last week for the failure of the government's recent White Paper (policy document) on science and technology to back any significant shift in funding from military to civilian research.

Prominent among the critics was Robert Jackson, who as parliamentary secretary in the Office of Public Service and Science (OPSS) — a post he has since lost in a cabinet reshuffle — was responsible for helping to oversee much of the drafting work on the White Paper. Speaking in a parliamentary debate, Jackson said that the government had missed the opportunity to address the potential which the ending of the Cold War offered for releasing the scientific and technological resources tied up in the defence industries. An industrial strategy was needed, he said, to ensure the rapid shift of these resources to competitive industries serving civilian markets.

Although the White Paper does contain a chapter on science and technology in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), this does little more than repeat the ministry's own views that the £2.6 billion (\$4 billion) it spends annually on R&D should primarily be devoted to the development of new weapons, and that it does not have responsibility for meeting broader national objectives.

The lack of any specific commitment to wealth creation, apart from emphasizing the need to encourage greater spin-off from MoD research projects, has given rise to the widespread suspicion that the chapter was not drafted by the Office of Science and Technology (OST) but by MoD officials.

It is also being quoted (for example by the Labour Party's shadow science minister, Marjorie Mowlam) as evidence that, despite being given responsibility for co-ordinating research spending across all government departments, OST may find it difficult to exert significant influence over how individual departments spend their money.

Those from the government's own party who had hoped for a stronger endorsement of moves to transfer funds from military to civilian research include Sir Giles Shaw, chairman of the Select Committee on Science and Technology. Shaw told the Commons that he was concerned that the White Paper did not provide the OST with any control over how the MoD uses its research funds — and that his committee was likely to look at this issue "very keenly" in the years ahead.

In reply to such criticisms, David Davis, who has taken over Jackson's responsibili-

ties in the OPSS, replied that he had been told it was "a good idea to be underestimated at the start of one's job".

Davis also said that the government was keeping a close eye on another concern raised in the debate, namely that, with the imminent splitting of the Science and Engineering Research Council, support for research in chemistry could suffer by falling between the responsibilities of the new Biotechnology and Biology Research Council, and those of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

Both the Royal Institute of Chemistry and the Institution of Chemical Engineers have expressed concern that topics such as biological organic chemistry may find themselves neglected in this way — and that, unlike biologists and physicists, chemists will not have a research council they can describe as "home". Davis responded by promising to keep the issue under review, and pointing out that all the research councils had been told to ensure support for the

"underlying science" in their areas of responsibility.

David Dickson

■ The setting up of Britain's new Council for Science and Technology — the replacement for the Advisory Committee for Science and Technology (ACOST) — has been brought forward by two months to speed up the implementation of recommendations in the government's White Paper.

William Waldegrave said last week that next month's meeting of ACOST would be its last, and that the new CST, whose members will include industrial and academic scientists as well as representatives of government departments, will be established by the end of October.

According to Waldegrave, the accelerated schedule (CST was originally to be set up by next January) will allow the council to play an active role in the preparation of the government's first "forward look", setting out the five-to-ten-year prospects for the research programmes of individual government departments.

Duesberg's anti-AZT campaign continues

London. Peter Duesberg, the controversial US molecular biologist who claims that the main cause of AIDS is recreational drug use rather than HIV infection, has rejected as a "fabrication" the results of a recent study claiming to disprove his hypothesis.

A group of US researchers, led by Michael Ascher of the California Department of Health Services, have used data from the San Francisco Men's Health Study to show that men who were heavy drug users but showed no evidence of infection with HIV did not contract AIDS, in contrast to those in the study who were either light drug users, or did not use drugs at all, but were shown to be infected with HIV (*Nature* 362, 102; 1993).

The California researchers argue that the results directly challenge Duesberg's idea that AIDS is a clinical manifestation of long-term consumption of recreational drugs and of treatment with the antiviral agent zidovudine (AZT). However Duesberg himself, speaking at a meeting in London last weekend organized by a group known as the Steering Committee Against AZT Malpractice (SCAM), said that he refused to accept the group's conclusion, and continued to insist that his own interpretations are valid.

In particular, Duesberg criticized the labelling of one table used in the publication of the California group's results for not indicating the category of "no drug use", and that the paper was therefore invalid (apparently disregarding an explanation in the text that these subjects were represented

in the table's category of "light" drug users).

He also said that he refused to accept the way that the results of the study were presented in a graph, claiming that "the curve is a fabrication and the conclusions are flawed". Indeed, Duesberg claimed that the research group's findings could be interpreted to support the opposite conclusion to that suggested, namely that there was a 100 per cent correlation between AIDS and drug use.

In support of his own views, Duesberg told the meeting that AZT was as toxic to human T-cells (the target for HIV infection) as it was to the virus itself. But this, he said, is ignored by Wellcome, the company which produces AZT, as well as by researchers and doctors who are currently treating HIV-positive patients with AZT, and who follow earlier studies by Samuel Brodeur and colleagues which showed that human cells are 1,000 times less sensitive to AZT toxicity than HIV.

Michael Ascher, speaking by telephone from California, was "stumped" to hear that Duesberg was still trying to publicly misrepresent the *Nature* epidemiology study, particularly when Duesberg has acknowledged in a letter to *The Lancet* (12 June 1993) that the category of "light" drug users mentioned in the study includes the "none" drug users. Ascher said that Duesberg appeared unable to accept clear controlled epidemiological data and simply jumped from one favourite hypothesis to another to suit his argument.

Julie Clayton