

# Ebullient science adviser steps down

The retirement next week of Britain's Chief Science Adviser for the past five years will rob us of a forceful public servant and proselytizer of science at a time when there are too few.

SIR William Stewart, the British government's Chief Scientific Adviser, steps down next week after five years in which there has been a bigger upheaval in the public administration of British science than at any time in living memory. "Bill" Stewart (hardly anybody addresses him more formally) has been in the thick of the transformation. To all appearances, he has relished most of the past few years, but he has also agonized for much of the time. How well has he done?

Contrary to expectation, the British government has a penchant for appointing science advisers who are not conventional *apparatchiks*. They range from Solly Zuckerman (later Lord Zuckerman, who died last year), the zoologist turned polymath, who often talked as if his masters were his puppets, to patrician Lord Rothschild, who spoke of them alternatively as his servants and his idols: Rothschild revered Edward Heath, *his* prime minister.

Mrs Margaret Thatcher's advisers were, in succession, Sir Robin Nicholson (indistinguishable from a civil servant), who left to become research director at the glass-makers Pilkington, and Sir John Fairclough (more in his prime minister's swashbuckling style), who afterwards became something in the City of London. Stewart, by contrast, is unambiguously Mr John Major's man, even persuading his prime minister to preside at a press conference this week (see page 266) to bang the drum for science.

Stewart is unambiguously and ostentatiously a Scot. Born 60 years ago on the island of Islay (pronounced "eye-lah") off the West of Scotland, he wonders from time to time whether he may yet go back to "crofting" (which is the Scottish word for living honestly off the land). Like many bright lads from the Scottish islands, he graduated from the University of Glasgow (where he took his PhD as well). His professional line is the fixation of nitrogen. He joined the faculty at the University of Dundee at the age of 33, and was there as that university made its successful claim on public attention by building an excellent enterprise in molecular biology out of virtually nothing. His reward was a two year spell as Secretary of the Agriculture and Food Research Council and then the move to Whitehall.

Stewart's strong suit is not guile (Zuckerman), combativeness (Fairclough) or magisterial certainty (Rothschild), but impatience; he is out to get things done.

He has had ample exercise of that ambition in the past five years, and ample experience of the frustration that follows constructive impatience.

Some credit Stewart with having pulled off the great coup (in 1992) of arranging the transfer of responsibility for the then-five research councils (now there are six) from the Department of Education and Science to the Cabinet Office, where they are now dependants of the Office of Science and Technology of which Stewart is effectively the chief executive officer (CEO). (In that nomenclature, the chairman is the political head, quaintly known as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, now Mr David Hunt.)

Stewart declines sole credit for that radical administrative change, but acknowledges his support for the idea. The only way to put science and technology "at the heart of government", he says. Even critics of the change acknowledge that it has done that; their misgivings are that being at the heart of government makes the research councils vulnerable to whims of government departments fighting each other for influence.

That change had apparently been decided even before the election in April 1992, won by John Major against the odds offered by the opinion polls. The election brought Stewart not just a prime minister whom he recognized, but a talented minister (Mr William Waldegrave) who also had an interest in stirring the administrative pot. They (the two Williams) would have a period of public consultation and would then publish a White Paper (British governments' way of saying what it intends to do).

Stewart has been in overdrive ever since. Scots have the reputation of being taciturn, but Stewart has taken to public platforms like a professional. He has thrown his substantial frame about the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) indefatigably whenever there has been an audience of opinion-makers to address. At a private meeting at Cambridge a year ago, the news at breakfast was that there was "fog at Stornoway, and Sir William will be delayed". But everybody knew that he would not be delayed for long. He was there at lunch.

His big triumph is what is called "foresight", of which concept this journal has been steadfastly lukewarm. The idea is that a strategy for the formulation of priorities in research should evolve from a

process of continuing consultation among interested parties — researchers, industry and government. One objective has been to define priorities; another has been to persuade uncommunicative partners in what should be a common enterprise to talk to each other.

Judgement on the foresight exercise will no doubt be made by events that happen in the years ahead, but nobody can complain that the project has not been carried through energetically. There have been fifteen substantial reports on the subject in the past few weeks, together with a kind of wrap-up document last Monday. Goodness knows what mayhem that publishing programme has created. But the way in which governments elsewhere are sending emissaries to Britain to learn more of Stewart's concept of foresight is a striking measure of his influence.

In this as in the other events of the past five years, Stewart's outstanding feat has been his failure to make enemies. Part of the explanation has been his willingness to talk and even to listen to sometimes outlandish groups. (The pressure group called "Save British Science", which is not outlandish, has never previously been as closely heard.)

Another part of the explanation is Stewart's evident conviction that he has been doing the best he can for science. That is the Islay island lad's passion. Even working scientists who do not share his goals know a fellow whose heart is in the right place, and applaud him for it. That, they also remember, will have rubbed off on the civil servants with whom he has been mixing these past five years.

Being Scottish has also helped a lot. It is not just the accent (and, occasionally, the vocabulary), but the reminder that even Britain is changing quickly and that the Old Establishment may have used up its officer class. Stewart, a little subversively, is proud that his office sent the European Commission a paper saying what should be done about the Fourth Framework Programme that appears to have carried weight. Officials in Brussels are certainly respectful.

Stewart's capacity for ebullience has been his other strong suit. When things have been going well, he has cut the figure of a man so full of enthusiasm that he cannot possibly express it all in the time available. Public officials are rarely in that mould. It will be a pity if Stewart does indeed go back to crofting. **John Maddox**