

Don't leave it to the market-place

The collapse of the British government's attempts to privatize its observatories should not be the end of the story. But any future government must take heed of the lessons of a severe, and costly, embarrassment.

Two key issues confront any government concerned to make the best use of scarce resources for research. The first is prioritization. The second, once priority areas have been chosen, is to find ways of spending the money in the most cost-effective way.

Shortly after the Conservative party won the last British general election, it decided on radical new approaches to both tasks. For the first, the government set out to build a consensus on priorities between the producers and users of research through the process that was given the ungainly title of Technology Foresight. The success of this strategy has been markedly greater than that of the government's efforts to tackle the second. These have been based on an overzealous approach — firmly located in a belief in the overriding powers of the market-place — that tries to draw a firm dividing line between those bodies whose job is to decide what research public money should be used to 'purchase' and those that seek to provide the 'goods' that meet this description.

There are, of course, areas in which this approach can reap substantial dividends, and has already done so. Most of these are cases in which research priorities can be defined by relatively clear, and often short-term, objectives. When it comes to government institutions that support more basic science, however, the situation is different. Goals and targets cannot be so precisely defined. And there is a fundamental discrepancy between the year-to-year timescale on which profit-oriented bodies tend to operate, the five-yearly timescale of most politicians and the much longer timescale that substantial scientific achievement requires.

Such a discrepancy in timing has, as much as anything, been the rock on which efforts to transfer the management of Britain's national observatories into private hands has foundered (see page 391). Few have needed persuading that there is much to be gained in principle by such a move. The main stumbling-block appears to have been the need to provide for the pension rights of employees. Here, the Treasury appears to have seen no short-term benefit in digging into its pockets for the £12 million or so which, in the long-term, it will still be obliged to provide. Correctly, its demand that this money be taken out of the annual science budget has been firmly resisted by the Office of Science and Technology.

The resulting stalemate would be farcical if up to £2 million had not already been committed in legal fees on the proposed transfer (some of it admittedly to cover redundancies and separate legal difficulties). This is money that would otherwise have been spent on research at a time when the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) is already almost bankrupt. PPARC's experience has certainly given the government a brutal taste of reality, as well as justified embarrassment, as it contemplates the similar transfer to private management of a raft of research council institutes. The total pension commitment of these runs into hundreds of millions of pounds. Taking that type of money out of the science budget would have a devastating effect.

As a thoughtful report published this week by the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology points out, there is much to applaud in the government's desire to ensure that public money is spent on science in the most cost-effective way. The big question mark is whether the market-place alone is the best way of achieving this. The committee's answer, appropriately enough, is that there are cases in which this is true. But in

others the answer is clearly no. In such circumstances, a common interest in good science means that strategic alliances between those who decide scientific priorities and those who pursue them must be maintained.

That, of course, has long been the argument of the opposition Labour party. If, as widely expected, it is returned to power in the general election due next May at latest, it will have the opportunity to put its money where its mouth is. But it will have to avoid the opposite traps offered by the rigidities and vested interests of the status quo. Various imaginative alternatives exist, such as making more use of university-based groups as the managerial bridge between the taxpayer as the 'customer' and the scientist as the 'provider' of basic research. But an uncritical commitment to continued state control would be as unproductive as an equally uncritical embrace of market solutions has already turned out to be. □

News story that wasn't

A biotechnology company is developing the non-informative press release into a fine art.

MANY readers of this issue of *Nature* will no doubt be pleased to be informed of two new genetic links to a form of diabetes (maturity-onset diabetes of the young, or MODY). MODY patients suffer from a relative inability of the body to produce insulin in response to glucose stimulation. The new work (pages 455–460) reveals links between particular gene defects and two types of MODY, but, more significantly still, that the defective genes code for particular proteins that regulate gene transcription. The specific identification of those mutant proteins opens up new lines of research (see pages 407–408).

Interested science journalists will have been aware of all of this a week ahead of the publication date, as *Nature* told them about it in its weekly (embargoed) press release. Some of those journalists may also have received a press release issued a week previously by Millennium Pharmaceuticals Inc. That company, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, specializes in identifying genes responsible for major diseases. Their work includes a \$70-million collaboration with Hoffmann-La Roche in obesity and type-II diabetes.

And, apparently, that work has borne fresh fruit. Millennium says that it "has identified a gene implicated in the development of type II diabetes". The press release refers to "diverse population sources" of the DNA, and "positional cloning techniques". But that, as far as the science is concerned, is it. We are told that, commendably, details of the work are being withheld pending publication in a peer-reviewed journal. But also that Hoffmann-La Roche has already been sufficiently impressed by the work to hand over a "milestone payment" — amount unspecified. On the other hand, caution is necessary because: "This press release contains forward looking statements... subject to risks and uncertainties that may cause actual results to differ materially from those stated". That standard legal disclaimer appears unusually apt.

Readers can speculate for themselves on the purpose of such a release. Business news it may be, but hard science news it isn't. □