

Time for a firm grasp on UK science priorities

The Labour party is expected to win the election in the United Kingdom next week, but it has so far provided little to inspire researchers. The challenges that face it are chronic and require management with insight.

Unless the psephologists prove themselves to have been spectacularly inept, Britain will wake up on Friday next week (2 May) to its first change of government in 18 years. On the basis of what little has been said about science during the general election campaign, there are few overt reasons for researchers as such to be enthusiastic about the prospect of a Labour administration. Indeed, the promises of Tony Blair, the Labour leader, to place science "at the heart of government" have had little of the resonance — and raised little of the fervour — of the similar words that helped sweep Harold Wilson to power in 1964 on the back of a commitment to create a new Britain "forged in the white heat of this [technological] revolution".

Wilson's strategy failed, of course. A powerful Ministry of Technology turned out to be an unwieldy monster, while promises of increased support for science evaporated in the crises that gripped the economy towards the end of the decade. Seen in this light, the cautious style of electioneering adopted by today's Labour party might seem prudent. Moreover, some significant initiatives introduced by the Conservative government have proved partly beneficial: technology foresight and research assessment have both focused attention where it was needed within the UK science base, and have attracted respect and even emulation in other countries. Increased autonomy of science institutions has led to enhanced productivity.

But the indigenous technological industrial base of the United Kingdom that was, above all, supposed to be the beneficiary still lacks international competitiveness. Another major task lies within government itself: to forge a genuinely transdepartmental science policy. The failure to achieve this has led to additional burdens on the research councils due to government departments retreating from research

support, underlining the absence of an overall strategy.

Providing a better career framework for researchers is still a critical issue for any government that cares about science. An improved approach must retain the flexibility needed to ensure that resources are focused on the most productive fields of science, with the elements of continuity in support needed to persuade potential recruits that science offers a worthwhile and rewarding career. Too often over the past 18 years, the first of these dominated the second. Researchers who are intellectually and professionally mobile need a sense that they are valued for those very qualities.

Finally, Britain's next government, whatever its political complexion, will face growing pressure to increase the social accountability of the research community. Accommodating such pressure will itself require a more sophisticated strategy for enhancing the involvement and understanding of the public where science and the concerns of society connect or even collide. This task must be seen in terms of encouraging public involvement in technology assessment and technological choice.

The Wilsonian faith in technology and in government push proved naive and impractical economically. The Thatcherite zeal for a free market in ideas and people has proved powerful but inadequate. Finding an appropriate balance is the next government's principal task. But Labour's ideas still lack conviction, and its pre-election team lacks anyone with detailed insight into managing research. If elected, it will need the help of politically sympathetic scientists and technologists to turn its vague promises into concrete and effective actions. In turn, the sensitivity of such individuals to political realities will be critical to the government's success in managing British science. □

Tip of an iceberg?

All of Japan's semi-government research and development needs critical re-examination.

Japan is abuzz this week with calls for PNC, a semi-government organization (*tokushu hojin*) responsible for research and development in nuclear power, to be dissolved following a series of scandalous attempts by PNC officials to cover up mistakes made in accidents at its facilities (see page 746). But many of Japan's *tokushu hojin* have similar inherent defects.

Tokushu hojin, of which there are dozens consuming a large portion of the government's budget, are an odd breed of organization that span the public and private sector. Many are involved in government research and development and most of their funds come from the taxpayer. They are tightly linked to the government ministry or agency responsible for overseeing them. Bureaucrats often do a stint of management at a *tokushu hojin* in mid-career, while senior bureaucrats often retire to *tokushu hojin* to receive high salaries for a few years and a second retirement allowance.

Not surprisingly, ministries and agencies jealously guard their *tokushu hojin* and are reluctant to see them dissolved or reformed, no

matter how moribund they are. The Science and Technology Agency (STA), for example, has clearly been slow to act against PNC despite overwhelming evidence of incompetence and deception since the Monju accident. Two years ago, Makiko Tanaka tried to push for reform of *tokushu hojin* under the STA, which she then headed. But almost nothing happened (see *Nature* 373, 551; 1995).

PNC escaped unscathed then, but now seems destined for a major overhaul. But what of the many other *tokushu hojin*, such as the National Space Development Agency and the New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization?

Not all are necessarily bad. The Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (RIKEN), one of Japan's leading research organizations, for example, seems to draw strength from its semi-government status, which allows greater autonomy and flexibility than is found in ordinary government research institutes. But a thorough re-examination of all research-related *tokushu hojin* is in order at a time when Japan plans to pump much more money into government research. □