

Taking issue with UK funding priorities

To the editor—I was dismayed by Bridget Ogilvie's statement in her recent Commentary¹ that "the trend in [British] government support for the civil science base has been downwards for the last decade". Twice last year I explained to her privately that this was a misleading statement, but as she continues to make it, I must now correct it in public.

It is true that the British government's support for civil research and development (R&D) has been falling, but civil R&D is essentially a for-profit industrial activity, encompassing such processes as the generation of nuclear power, the design of commercial aircraft or drug development. These are not the Wellcome Trust's areas of activity. In any case, industry's own support for civil R&D has risen, and Britain's overall civil R&D budgets have grown from £9.14 billion in 1983 to £10.95 billion in 1994 (1990 constant prices)^{2,3}.

The Wellcome Trust's activities concentrate on academic science, and here the British government's support has been upwards. The Research Councils received £715 million in 1984, and £1012 million in 1994 (1990 constant prices)^{2,3}. There is, therefore, no justification for Bridget Ogilvie's statement that "if the decline in [British] government support continues" the Trust will have to relocate its activities abroad. There is no such decline.

Further, governments and universities will have to ponder the degree to which the Trust's powers of leverage tip into bullying. Consider the study of the history of medicine. Thanks to the Trust, that subject is probably better served in the UK than in any country in the world. Leverage in that area, therefore, may become immoral if it pushes universities into diverting scarce resources from Cinderella areas into an already-flush one. I am the Chairman of the Management Committee of the Trust's Cambridge University Unit for the History of Medicine, which is an integral and substantial part of a department that achieved a starred 5A rating in the recent research assessment exercise, yet it is to be moved to East Anglia, partly because the University of East Anglia (UEA) has promised to take over its core salaries. Although I am dismayed at its loss, and I fear that the UEA cannot approach Cambridge's facilities for scholarship in this area, I recognize that the University of Cambridge cannot allow

its spending priorities to be determined by an outside body.

The Trust is a wonderful organization that has contributed hugely to the medical, scientific and cultural welfare of Britain and the world. I have repeatedly praised it in public². But its officers should not inflate its role through the promulgation of misleading statistics, nor should they try to coerce too many democratically-elected governments and sovereign universities into bending to its financial muscle, or we might cease to love it quite so uncritically.

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Ogilvie replies—Dr. Kealey appears to have misunderstood my point. A glance at the latest government statistics⁴ shows how government funding of civil R&D breaks down into three main components: (1) the Research Councils (2) the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC's) and (3) civil departments. I have no argument with Kealey that research council funding has increased over the past decade. However, he neglects to mention the striking decline in spending by civil departments (down £338 million in real terms over the decade 1986/7 to 1996/7) and by the HEFC's (down by £126 million over the same period).

Civil Departments include, for example, the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and the decline in research funding has seriously impaired their ability to underpin the delivery of effective policy (think of the recent disaster with BSE). But my point in the article "Philanthropic Goals" was that the decline in support for university infrastructure (through the HEFC's) has seriously damaged the capacity of universities to provide the "well found laboratory" within which private funders like the Wellcome Trust are willing to support research.

Kealey really is a lone voice in saying that this is not a problem. The Dearing Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education published earlier this year has recommended more support for research infrastructure⁵, industry has made a similar appeal⁶ and the Royal Society is also

pressing the case⁷. Many, many other sources could be cited. But Kealey seems oblivious to this consensus and chooses to ignore the hard data that exist. For example, a recent survey of research equipment in UK universities concluded that £474m is needed simply to bring the equipment stock up to date. (PREST/CASR University of Manchester 1996).

The Chief Scientist, Sir Robert May acknowledges that much of the recent growth in research funding in the UK has come from non-government sources⁸. Between 1990/1 and 1995/6, the increase from charities alone was 47%. The Trust is proud, rather than apologetic, that some of this money has won matching commitment from democratically elected governments, notably in Ireland, New Zealand and South Africa. Such "leverage" as Kealey describes it can only increase the total resource available for science—one of our key goals. It would give us greater confidence in the future of the UK science base if the British government were to make a similar matching commitment.

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- Research and Experimental Development Statistics 1994, in *Economic Trends*, Aug. 1996 No. 514 HMSO Reprod. in *Res. Fortnight* 2, 8 (1996).
- Science, Engineering and Technology Statistics, 1997. HMSO, London cm 3695. See Table 3.2.
- Dearing *et al.* Higher Education in the learning society. HMSO, London. (Main Report, p187).
- Financial Times, 9 September 1997 p12.
- Royal Society News Release, Research infrastructure in crisis, warns Royal Society, 1 December 1997.
- Speech at SmithKline Beecham Science Policy Symposium, 5-6 November 1997.

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