Basic Science's Skies Brighten in Britain

Prime Minister Thatcher signals a higher priority for fundamental research after a period of tight funding

London

AFTER ALMOST 10 YEARS of what many scientists consider to have been less-than-benign neglect, the British government says it has had a change of heart, and that support for basic science has once again become an important political priority—even if scientists cannot expect the generous increase in funding that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who as a graduate chemist herself carried out research on glyceride monolayers at the beginning of this earlier period, spoke enthusiastically about the value of basic science in an address to members of the Royal Society at the end of September, when she argued that "a nation which does not value trained intelligence is doomed."

Further evidence of the new thinking in Whitehall was provided last week by Robert Jackson, the minister responsible for science in the Department of Education of Science, who said at a meeting in London organized by the society that there had been a "shift in balance" in the government's attitude toward fundamental research.

At the beginning of the decade, he said, its top priority had been to cut public spending in order to strengthen the economy, and during this period "the scientific community was bound to be affected."

Since then, Jackson added, various goals sought by the government, such as its attempts to ensure greater collaboration between universities and industry, had been achieved. And with a stronger economy, the government was now in a position to take a more positive stance toward the scientific community.

To members of this community, the first test of the government's claimed change of heart will come later this month, when next year's science budget is announced.

For the past 2 years, the government has ignored pleas from the Advisory Board for the Research Councils that an extra $175 million was needed to restore the vitality of Britain's "science base," and has kept funding virtually constant in real terms.

David Phillips, professor of molecular biophysics at the University of Oxford and chairman of the ABRC, which has expressed its "acute disappointment" at seeing its advice ignored, promises that "our complaints will be even more vocal if the situation is repeated this year."

Jackson warned that, despite new funding promises, the days of rapid growth in the science budget were over, and said he welcomed a current debate in the British scientific community about living with "science in a steady state" as being "a shift of emphasis which is sensible, desirable, and welcome."

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Prime Minister Thatcher *in a speech to the Royal Society said "a nation which does not value trained intelligence is doomed."*

The government's top priority, said Jackson, was now to ensure "that public funds for science are well managed," in particular by concentrating not on the content of research programs, but on the procedures by which these funds are allocated.

"The watchwords must be selectivity and concentration," he said. "We need new procedures to help us meet decisions on allocating resources according to these principles." The government has been remolding the system through which it funds research to put greater stress on strategic research important to the economy and to give greater representation to the industrial sector in making funding decisions (*Science*, 25 September 1987, p. 1562).

Jackson said the government welcomed various steps that had recently been taken to improve the way in which research funds were distributed, such as the setting up in Manchester of a Centre for Exploitation of Science and Technology, and the initiative that has been taken by the Science and Engineering Research Council to establish a number of university-based Interdisciplinary Research Centers.

Several speakers from private industry said they, in turn, welcomed the government's efforts to reduce the general level of public spending and its support for encouraging a greater openness in the academic community to industry's needs, but warned that cuts in university budgets had reached the point of becoming counterproductive.

"To paraphrase Mark Twain's statement that 'progress is great, but it can go on for too long,' I feel that the same thing could be said about the squeeze on universities," said Derek Roberts, a top research executive from General Electric Corporation (GEC), who is shortly to become provost of University College, London.

One of the main problems faced by the scientific community, he said—and one which appears to have had a far greater impact on government thinking than complaints by scientists about the insufficiency of research funds—was the question of morale, and in particular the fact that poor job prospects appear to be discouraging science graduates from entering research. Similar complaints were made by several other prominent speakers including, for example, Aaron Klug, director of the Medical Research Council's Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge.

Phillips of the ABRC said that he considered the difficulty of recruiting young research workers "the most serious problem addressing the scientific community at the present time." Pointing out that the problem was not unique to the West, but was also evident in countries such as the Soviet Union, he pleaded that "the science base must be in a position to compete for an appropriate proportion of the talented young people who enter our universities."

"Industry, together with the scientific community, should work jointly on both the government and on public opinion," said Roberts of GEC. "If the public was more concerned about the quality of education and of research in this country, then more would be done about it."

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