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U.K. Science Funding Increase

Tony Blair

When elected 15 months ago, the new Labour government pledged to modernize Britain and to equip it for the next century. Science is integral to fulfilling this promise. Last month we announced an additional £1.0 billion ($1.65 billion) investment in basic research over the 3 years starting in 1999–2000. This is linked to a further £400 million from the Wellcome Trust—the major charitable funder of scientific research in the United Kingdom—making £1.4 billion ($2.3 billion) in total. Compared with government spending of £2.3 billion ($3.8 billion) on the science base in 1998–1999, this represents a major boost.

In investing in our science base, we are building on strength. In his analysis "The Scientific Wealth of Nations,"* my chief scientific adviser Robert May showed that the United Kingdom's basic research is second only to that of the United States in terms of the volume and influence of scientific publications and of winning major international scientific prizes. Our strengths are evenly spread across a wide range of disciplines, and we are particularly strong in the biomedical area. Last month's decision to spend an additional $2.3 billion on the science base is our response to the key research recommendation of a major inquiry into British higher education, which was reported in the summer of 1997.† That report said the top priority was to renew aging facilities and laboratories. It also emphasized the importance of directing resources to the very best scientists, a challenge facing all countries as it becomes increasingly expensive to stay in the business of world-class research.

> ...the science base is the absolute bedrock of our economic performance...

Our investment includes some $1.5 billion for building and refurbishing university laboratories and equipment, including $500 million from the Wellcome Trust; $660 million to meet the recurrent and capital costs of new project funding in priority areas; and $165 million from Wellcome to be applied toward a new, high-intensity, synchrotron x-ray machine. The settlement also includes a commitment to retain dual support—separate funding streams for infrastructure and project support—but to improve transparency and accountability in universities' use of research funds. This adds up to a major additional investment in British science, reflecting the commitment of the new Labour government to modernization and reform.

Although it is said that the United Kingdom is good at science but poor at converting science into business, this is only partly true. Britain's successful aerospace, chemical, petrochemical, and pharmaceutical industries have long had close and productive links with our science base. More recently, we have had considerable success in biotechnology and in the creative media, building, for example, on our strengths in software design. However, in other areas we have not capitalized fully on our scientific strengths.

So alongside our investment in the science base we are working on initiatives to increase knowledge transfer between science and business. We have, for example, recently launched a £50 million ($82.5 million) scheme to provide venture capital for start-up companies spun off of universities. But it would be shortsighted to ignore the health of the science base itself. The new Labour government recognizes that the science base is the absolute bedrock of our economic performance, generating the skills, knowledge, and technology that will maintain the United Kingdom's competitive edge in the global markets of the new millennium. That is why we are investing now.

These are exciting times. Science continues to push back the frontiers of knowledge, finding new areas of which we were previously unaware and making discoveries that add novel twists to the world views we were taught as children. I intend to ensure that the United Kingdom continues to foster excellence in scientific and technological cooperation. Our success will help realize the creative potential of the next generation.

The author is prime minister of the United Kingdom, 10 Downing Street, London, SW1A 2AA, UK.
*R. M. May, *Science* **275**, 793 (1997).
†National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the NCIHE* (NCIHE, Hayes, Middlesex, UK, 1997).
See also N. Williams, *Science* **281**, 314 (1998).