

• ALLIANCE FOR SCIENCE

The launch of the Alliance for Science last month marks the first serious trade union initiative on science policy for many years. It comprises the three trade unions primarily responsible for organising scientific research staff - the Association of Scientific, Managerial and Technical Staffs (ASTMS), the Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS) and the Association of University Teachers (AUT). The campaign is for an increased research and development effort in Britain, with more open decision-making, trade union involvement and a co-ordinated national science strategy. The formation of the Alliance creates a potential focus for the promotion of an effective and socially relevant policy for science. This has been absent among unionised scientists and technologists since the demise of the Association of Scientific Workers in the 1960s.

Cooperation amongst scientific and technical workers on R&D policy has been hindered by divisions over the allocation of resources to different sectors of science and in particular the number of jobs dependent on military research projects. The breakthrough was finally achieved at the 1984 Trades Union Congress when the pressures of government laboratory cutbacks, the financial squeeze on universities and Research Councils, and the impact of the recession on industrial research combined to generate a new urgency for sinking differences and agreeing a common policy. In addition the low profile of the trade unions was increasingly an embarrassment as establishment figures from science and industry became more vocal in their criticisms of government science and technology policy.

So, for example, the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology embraces many of the policy advisers forged in the white heat of Harold Wilson's scientific and technological revolution more recently tempered by allegiance to the SDP. It has pushed vigorously for a more serious, co-ordinated and open approach by government to scientific research. This has been reinforced by outspoken criticisms of current policies for industry and technology by industrialists such as Sir Kenneth Corfield.

The emergence of a clearer trade union voice on science, if somewhat overdue, will give welcome expression to the frustrations felt by many scientific and technological workers. However, if the Alliance for Science is to make substantial political headway and avoid the fate of a well meaning but unrealistic echo of the heady expansionist days of the early 1960s it has to confront three thorny problems.

The first is the issue of military research. Currently accounting for more than half of the total resources devoted by government to science this casts its shadow over UK R&D policy as a whole. It is this factor which so sharply distinguishes Britain from two of its main industrial competitors, Germany and Japan. As a proportion of Gross Domestic Product, in all three countries total R&D expenditure (including military) is of a similar order (about 2.4%) although the rate of growth is lower in Britain. But the dominance of the military sector in Britain results in a much weaker effort in civil research whether basic or applied.

It is difficult to conceive of a plausible policy for strengthening Britain's civil research which does not involve a major reallocation of resources from the military sector. Pessimism about the political realism of this in the face of current government policy applies even more forcibly to the alternative path which would be for Britain to spend a lot more on civil research without reducing military spending and consequently a much larger proportion of GDP on science research in general than it does now. A reallocation from military to civil research would obviously have direct consequences for the members of the scientific trade unions themselves. While it is sometimes suggested that this is primarily a problem for the IPCS which organises the scientists in the government military research establishments, it is equally a problem for the industrial members of ASTMS through the extensive placing of military development contracts in the private sector. It is apparent that without a thoroughly worked out research conversion

strategy such a policy will have difficulty sustaining the support of trade union members whose livelihood currently depends on Britain's military research effort. However it will not be resolved by ducking it as the Alliance's initial campaign declaration does.

The second problem is the complexity of the relationship between basic science and economic recovery. An over-simple model of industrial growth being triggered by the pumping of resources into scientific research was one of the rocks on which the Wilsonian modernisation strategy foundered.

A policy for science must be honest and discriminating in its support for particular research areas. Support for much fundamental work rests on legitimate cultural and intellectual grounds as well as the possibility of practical benefit. This must be openly acknowledged and not cloaked with empty promises of unspecified economic miracles. A much neglected area is 'strategic science' which addresses fundamental problems of obvious practical relevance and has a medium term payoff of perhaps ten years. Two contemporary examples would be molecular biology research relevant to biotechnology and solid-state physics research relevant to microelectronics

The absence of a policy for strategic science is the achilles heel of British science policy. It was thrown out of the window by Lord Rothschild in his 1971 report against the protestations of Fred Dainton and the Research Councils. Ironically, in view of Rothschild's market oriented 'customer-contractor' principle, it has been the Thatcher government which has begun to rehabilitate the concept. The strengthening of the central science policy machinery of the Cabinet Office Science Secretariat, even while the CPRS 'think-tank' was dismantled round its ears is an implicit recognition that strategic science had disappeared down the gap between the Research Councils' basic research mission and the government departments' short-term applied science needs.

The contradiction for Thatcherism is that the renewal of strategic science requires coordination and planning, sometimes presented under the more acceptable guise of 'picking winners'. A more focussed assault by the Alliance for Science on a policy for strategic science will probably reap more political rewards than the present implicit assertion that unselective support for all science will bear economic fruit.

The final problem concerns the democratic accountability of science. Public disenchantment with the negative applications of science is substantial. As Bill Brett of IPCS acknowledges: 'Science has got a bad name'. An important accompaniment to the growth of popular movements on peace, feminism and ecology has been a distrust of leaving decisions to 'the experts'. Central to any campaign for change in R&D policy must be a programme for democratic reform of the administration of science. A policy merely that scientists should be given more money to spend will fall on deaf ears as far as the public is concerned. Direct representation of workers, consumers and the public in many decisions on science and technology must be pursued.

The Alliance for Science in its calls for greater openness of decision making and for the establishment of a tripartite National R&D Economic Development Council make an important step in this direction. With a broader approach the Alliance could embrace not only other trade unions but a variety of social movements and thereby start to change the face of science and technology in Britain.

Fred Steward

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