

From: Sir John Mason, C.B., F.R.S.



For space meeting folder

The Royal Society

6 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AG

Telephone 01-839 5561 Ext 252 Telex 917876

Treas/DPC

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Dear Prime Minister,

NATIONAL POLICY ON SPACE RESEARCH

I am writing on behalf of our leading space scientists, all Fellows of the Royal Society, to express our concern at the apparent lack of a coherent, co-ordinated and clear-sighted national policy for space activities covering space science, technology, applications and the industrial aspects.

We understand that important decisions are imminent on the scope and scale of our future space effort, particularly in relation to a possible expansion of the ESA science programme and possible participation in the US Space Station. Whatever the decisions on these matters, we hope that the opportunity will be taken to formulate a well-conceived and co-ordinated strategy, looking to ends as well as means, and designed to ensure that the UK obtains the best overall return for its future investment in space.

Those of us who have been involved in various aspects of the UK space programme since its inception under the leadership of the Royal Society in the 1950's have seen this country gradually lose the initiative to France and Germany, not only because of our poorer economic performance, but because of our lack of a strong national space policy with clear objectives.

We do not wish to lobby for any particular project or level of funding, but only to argue for much improved methods of policy and decision making in which our leading scientists who have outstanding track records in designing, building and operating advanced satellite experiments can make an effective contribution. In the past, Ministers have been advised largely by officials with little or no real experience of either space science or the direct management of space projects and therefore with only limited insight into the problems and potentialities of new techniques. Decisions should reflect a proper balance between the interests of science, applications and industry otherwise the views of the latter will not be sufficiently challenged. The overall return from space projects depends as much on the quality of the data and their useful application as on the direct return to the space industry. The governments of the United States and France are better served by the great expertise that resides in NASA and CNES.

In the longer term we see the need for an interdepartmental Space Directorate in which government departments (especially DTI and MOD), the Research Councils (SERC and NERC), major university groups and the Royal Society would collaborate in the formulation of a programme for the next 10-15 years

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that would excite the scientific and user communities and provide opportunities for industry. Similar recommendations are made by the Space Review Committee chaired by Professor Richmond and commissioned by SERC.

As far as the decisions to be made in the next few weeks are concerned, I plan to invite representatives of the Departments and Research Councils to a meeting with senior space scientists so that their views may be taken into account.

Given our talent and record in this field, I can see no good reason why we should not regain the initiative in Europe. At least we should mobilize our resources to ensure that we obtain a proper return on our investment in ESA and not finish up, in effect, subsidizing the French and German space programmes.

I am confident that a lead from you, Prime Minister, would do much to improve our performance and meet with a very positive response from the scientific community.

Yours sincerely
John Mason

Treasurer and Senior Vice-President

The Rt Hon. Margaret Thatcher, M.P., F.R.S.,
No. 10 Downing Street
London, S.W.1.

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