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NOTE OF A CALL ON THE PRIME MINISTER BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION AND SCIENCE, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL AND THE CHAIRMAN OF THE ADVISORY BOARD FOR THE RESEARCH COUNCILS, AT 1830 HOURS ON MONDAY, 12 JULY, 1982, AT NO. 10 DOWNING STREET

The Prime Minister said that the value of the activities of the British Antarctic Survey had not been fully appreciated until the Falkland Islands crisis. She had discussed the work of the Survey with some of its principal scientists and she found it very impressive. We needed to ensure that we were in the strongest position in the Antarctic region when, in 1991, the possibility of modifying the Antarctic Treaty would first arise. The area was one of great strategic importance with extensive natural resources. In the past we had followed the policy of backing good scientists, for example in the field of nuclear physics. She believed that another £5 million should be found annually for BAS, from either the existing NERC budget or from within the total Science Budget. She did not wish to become personally involved in discussion of priorities which was for the bodies concerned.

Sir Hermann Bondi said that it was necessary to point out that some scientific work was very expensive and some was cheap. Arctic research was expensive - a great deal of expenditure was necessary on logistics before scientific activity could commence. In the field covered by the NERC, most scientific activity was relatively cheap. There was constant pressure to take money away from Antarctic research. It was argued that a much greater return could be obtained from the same amount of money if it was transferred elsewhere. He had resisted this pressure by referring to the 1967 Memorandum of Transfer. But the difficulties of maintaining the present provision for BAS, either in the NERC or in the ABRC should not be underestimated.

Sir Alec Merrison said that the Science Budget was declining in real terms. He did not object to "level funding" which was a good discipline. But he was loath to take resources

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some of the very important and potentially successful areas, such as remote sensing, information technology and medical research. Another form of pressure came from the big capital projects which had been started earlier and were now running at less than capacity owing to shortage of resources. On scientific grounds, we should, before increasing expenditure at BAS, support new projects in areas of greater scientific priority and provide more adequate support for existing projects.

The Prime Minister suggested that some of the priority areas of research could be undertaken by the United States. Then, we all knew that there were certain institutions which needed to be run down. We now needed an extra £5 million for expenditure on work which was of great importance to the country as a whole. One option would be to earmark a part of the Science Budget for strategic purposes, but she was loath to do that.

Sir Hermann Bondi said that however hard he tried, he would not be able to persuade those interested that the provision for BAS should be doubled. Nor would it be right to do so, given the rules by which the Science Budget operated.

The Prime Minister asked whether there was any contingency sum in the Science Budget. Sir Alec Merrison said that there was not. Indeed, the Treasury did not allow contingency provision. He added that he understood the strategic arguments which the Prime Minister was advancing. If the Prime Minister decided to take "strategic money" out of the Science Budget he could not object. The Prime Minister repeated that she did not wish to do this. There had to be some means of adjusting priorities to take account of changing circumstances. Sir Keith Joseph commented that both NERC and the ABRC had a difficult job in establishing priorities. Was the figure of £5 million the only one which we could contemplate? Sir Hermann Bondi said that more important than the actual sum would be the

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assurance that it would continue for several years. His suggestion was that the Government should add £5 million to the Science Budget, making it clear that the £5 million was earmarked to BAS. The next Science Budget would then consist of X plus £5 million. Since the figure X was as yet unknown, the Government would retain control of total expenditure. Sir Alec Merrison thought that this approach would be acceptable.

It was agreed that the Department of Education and Science should draft a letter, probably from the Prime Minister to Sir Alec Merrison, covering this point.

The conversation ended at 1910 hours.

A. J. C.

13 July, 1982

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