

W0145

MR ADDISON

ROYAL SOCIETY PROPOSAL FOR A NATIONAL SCIENCE ADVISORY COUNCIL.

Your minute of 7 July covering Sir George Porter's letter of 1 July refers.

I deal first with Sir George Porter's two specific proposals, for a National Science Advisory Council (NSAC) and a national merit awards scheme, and then with the more general issue of presentation of the Government's science policy.

Sir George has not made a strong case for an NSAC. The case, such as it is, seems to rest on the belief that the arrangements for considering science and technology matters centrally across departmental boundaries are too weak. In fact, they have been considerably strengthened during the past year by the creation of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Research and Development (E(RD)) and its supporting official committee (E(RD)(O)), and by the establishment of the Assessment Office. When these are added to the existing central bodies, notably ACARD, the Sub-Committee of Chief Scientists, and my own Secretariat, and when account is taken also of the arrangements that are likely to be established outside Government as a result of the ACARD report on Exploitable Areas of Science, I do not believe that a gap remains which justifies the creation of a further advisory body with the wide role which Sir George envisages. This view is strengthened by the fact that, to do its proposed job at all sensibly, the NSAC would need a substantial Secretariat and almost certainly a system of sub-committees or working groups. Sir George's letter was written before the Assessment Office was announced, and he will naturally be unaware of E(RD) and E(RD)(O), and I therefore recommend that the Prime Minister's reply refers to these developments, in suitably guarded language.

The merit award scheme is at first sight a more promising proposal. There are issues of selection and funding which Sir George has not yet addressed, but if these could be overcome it might indeed have a morale-raising effect among academic scientists, as well as the direct financial encouragement it will give

CCB39
I agree that we must pursue the idea of further revision. But the merit award scheme is more important. I do find a note for the F.R.S. - possibly by Philip in President's office on some similar committee not

at 11.45

them to remain in the UK. I understand that it is being considered seriously within DES, the UGC and the Research Councils, and, as Sir George suggests, they are the appropriate channel through which he should pursue this proposal.

I attach a draft response to Sir George.

So far as the presentation of the Government's science policy is concerned, it seems to me that there are two misconceptions that we need to tackle. The first is that Government has no proper central machinery for looking at science and technology issues as a whole; this relates closely to Sir George Porter's NSAC proposal. The second is that Government does not care about science, and particularly about basic science which cannot be shown to be of short term economic value. The basic science lobby is particularly vociferous, and this misconception has tended to poison the reception given to any Government science and technology initiative. An example is some of the coverage of the Assessment Office, which displayed a suspicion that it was intended as a weapon with which to attack basic science. I believe we need to quieten this lobby if we are to be able to get a sensible public discussion on other important issues, for example the low level of research and development financed by industry.

The announcement of the Assessment Office has helped to overcome the first misconception, though we still need to take opportunities to repeat the message and to emphasise that both Ministers and officials do discuss science and technology matters frequently on an interdepartmental basis. The second will need more sustained attention, and I consider that at the same time we should take the opportunity to raise related issues, such as R & D spend by industry.

The most obvious vehicle for presenting the Government's science policy is Ministerial speeches, particularly by the Prime Minister, the Lord President, and the Secretaries of State for Education and Science and Trade and Industry. A major speech on science policy by any of these, though preferably the Prime Minister, would be of great benefit. I should be happy to offer drafting help. This, I believe should be supported by shorter references in other relevant Ministerial speeches (for example Industry Year speeches) on which again I should be happy to assist. Interviews with science journalists would provide a

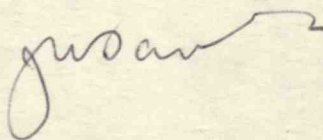
valuable back-up, but I suggest these should follow rather than precede Ministerial statements, in order that the discussion should be more on ground of the Government's own choosing.

Another important signal of interest is Ministerial attendance at major science events, such as facility openings, and I suggest that any such events over the remainder of this year should have priority in Ministerial diaries, particularly events with a basic science slant.

In addition, the Prime Minister's science seminar in 1983 was generally regarded as successful, and DTI have suggested building on this with an annual event, perhaps chaired by myself but with Ministerial participation. This would allow the Government's policy to be presented to an interested and influential audience, and would also give the science community the feeling that their voice was being heard. The risk is that it would become primarily an occasion for criticism of the Government, but I believe this risk could be minimised in the planning. Such an event might be slightly distanced from Government by being held under the joint auspices of ABRC and ACARD, and a role might be found for the Royal Society.

Finally, I consider that I have now been in post long enough to become rather more visible publicly, and, subject to Sir Robert Armstrong's agreement, I propose to begin to make myself available for interview by selected journalists.

This minute, which I am copying to Sir Robert Armstrong, incorporates views from DES, DTI and the Economic Secretariat; I understand that DES will also be making their views known direct in a Private Secretary letter.



JOHN W FAIRCLOUGH
Chief Scientific Adviser

JALAZH

DRAFT LETTER FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO SIR GEORGE PORTER

Thank you for your letter about a National Science Advisory Council and a merit awards scheme for university scientists. ^{On your second proposal} I think ~~the latter~~ ^{is a very} interesting ^{idea}, and I am pleased that you intend to pursue it with the Department of Education and Science and the University Grants Committee. ^{for university scientists}

^{On the} ~~So far as the~~ proposed National Science Advisory Council ~~is concerned~~, ^{my} the Government has, as you know, taken ~~very~~ substantial steps to strengthen the central machinery for considering science and technology matters, the most recent being the establishment of the new Science and Technology Assessment Office which was ^{announced} ~~made public~~ on 2 July. In addition to the advice which I receive from ACARD, and from the Chief Scientific Adviser in the Cabinet Office, there are regular meetings of Chief Scientists. The Annual Review of Government Funded R & D provides an overview which is considered by Ministers and officials, both of whom have frequent occasions to discuss science and technology matters interdepartmentally. ^{also} ~~In addition~~, I am awaiting with interest the outcome of the discussions on ways of implementing ACARD's recommendation for a forum, outside Government, which would bring together industry, academia and Government to identify exploitable areas of science for the future.

~~In the light of all this, I am far from convinced that there remains a gap in the central machinery which would justify setting up a further advisory body.~~

"So, while I fully appreciate the Royal Society's concerns, ~~I~~ I am not convinced that there is a gap in our central machinery which would justify setting up a further advisory body.

While the best practice remains the opportunity for discussion with the scientific community,

SCIENCE + TECHNOLOGY — PM'S
meeting with Sir George Porter — MAY '86

Sir G. PORTER

DG2AJC
(Back-up)



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

28 July 1986

The Prime Minister has seen your minute to me of 17 July about Sir George Porter's letter, and the Royal Society proposal for a National Science Advisory Council.

Rx || The Prime Minister has commented that some way must be found of finding a role for the Royal Society within the existing machinery before she replies to Sir George, possibly by putting its President ex officio on one of the scientific committees - perhaps ACARD or the ABRC. I should be grateful for urgent advice from you, in consultation with Rob Smith at the Department of Education and Science, as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister has noted the point you make about science seminars and confirmed that the idea should be pursued.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Rob Smith (Department of Education and Science), John Mogg (Department of Trade and Industry), Michael Stark (Cabinet Office) and Brian Unwin (Cabinet Office).

Mark Addison

J. W. Fairclough, Esq.,
Cabinet Office.

CJ