



The Save British Science Society

29-30 Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9QU

Tel: 020 7679 4995 Fax: 020 7916 8528

SBS 05/01

SBS submission to the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee's
scrutiny of Research Councils UK

1. Save British Science is pleased to submit this evidence in advance of the committee's scrutiny session on RCUK. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

2. Although SBS believes strongly in the need for the Research Councils to work together where appropriate, we were never convinced that there should have been a need for the creation of RCUK. Its formation had the appearance of being a reaction to the perception that the Government needed to "do something" in response to the last quinquennial review of the Research Councils. This impression was somewhat strengthened when the former Director General of the Research Councils said in his speech at the launch of RCUK that all it needed as a new logo and a new website.

3. Nevertheless, we accept that cross-Council collaboration was not as strong as it could have been and that, in a world where interdisciplinary science is increasingly important, partnerships between Councils are a more crucial part of the research funding landscape than they have ever been. For this reason, we have not openly criticised the formation of RCUK, in the hope that whatever the costs, it would begin to address this challenge.

4. We believe that it may be too soon to judge effectively whether RCUK is in fact helping the Research Councils to work together, but we believe that the costs of at least some of its activities are not fully justified.

Executive Committee

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| R W Joyner FRSC (Chr) | C Hardacre |
| W Banks FREng | J Harley |
| D Braben | H Jones |
| R Dowler | D Noble CBE FRS |
| M Freeman | S J Robinson OBE FRS FREng |
| L Georgiou | P T Saunders |
| H Griffiths FREng | V Stone |

Advisory Council

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Sir George Alberti | Prof A Hewish FRS |
| Sir Geoffrey Allen FRS FREng | Prof C Humphreys FREng |
| Prof S Arnott CBE FRS | Sir R Hoffenberg KBE FRCP |
| Sir Eric Ash CBE FRS FREng | Dr Tom Inch FRSC |
| Sir James Black OM FRS | Sir Hans Kornberg FRS |
| Professor V Bruce OBE FRSE | Sir Harold Kroto FRS |
| Jane Cannon MBE | Prof Joe Lamb FRSE |
| Dr Simon Campbell FRS FRSC | Lord Lewis of Newnham FRS |
| Sir David Cox FRS | Sir C Llewellyn Smith FRS |
| Prof A Cullen OBE FRS FREng | Sir Ian Lloyd |
| Sir Richard Doll CH FRS | Sir John Maddox |
| Sir Brian Follett FRS | Prof Bob Michell MRCVS |
| Dr Ian Gibson MP | Sir Paul Nurse FRS |

| |
|-----------------------------|
| Dame Bridget Ogilvie |
| Prof Hugh Pennington FRSE |
| Sir Martin Rees FRS |
| Sir Derek Roberts FRS FREng |
| Baroness Sharp of Guildford |
| Sir David Smith FRS |
| Sir Richard Southwood FRS |
| Sir Richard Sykes FRS |
| Ian Taylor MBE MP |
| Dr Ivan Yates CBE FREng |

5. In 1997, just 2% of the Science Vote was administered centrally by the Office of Science & Technology rather than by the individual Research Councils. Now, some 23% of the budget is decided centrally. The effect of this rapidly increasing central spending is that, while the Science Vote as a whole has increased by 68% in real terms, the individual Research Councils have not seen similar increases.¹

6. The Engineering & Physical Science Research Council has seen an increase of just 6% in its budget over the same time. Like all the Research Councils, it has also been given extra responsibilities, with the overall effect that the percentage of physics grant applications that have been successful has fallen from 48% in 2000 to 29% today. This decline is not due to increasing demand, because the number of applications has fallen by 20% over the same timeframe.²

7. With scientific research appearing to suffer cuts while the Government is unquestionably investing very large and increasing sums of taxpayers' money in science, any new costs, such as those associated with RCUK, must be rigorously justified.

8. RCUK probably makes up a very small proportion of the centrally administered funds (the bulk of which are presumably infrastructure funding awarded under the Science Research Investment Fund), but in a situation where funding will always be tight, all costs must be justified. SBS believes that, in at least some cases, that is not currently possible.

9. For example, towards the end of 2003, RCUK produced two glossy brochures entitled *A Vision for Research* and *A Synthesis of Strategies*. These documents were completely at odds with what RCUK should have been doing.

10. The culmination of the two documents was a list of research questions that that "the Research Councils will be working to solve in the next few years". The list includes questions ranging from "What is gravitation?" to "What does it mean to be a citizen of the expanding European Community [sic]?"

11. It is absurd to propose that officials in Swindon can dictate that where Newton and Einstein reached the barrier of their genius, the Research Councils will nevertheless "solve" the question "What is gravity?" within the next few years. Whatever theoretical and experimental breakthroughs are taking place at the moment, it remains an extraordinary claim. And while it may be desirable to understand the effects of increasing the size of the European Union, if it is important for public policy, the question should be addressed by the relevant ministry (presumably the Foreign Office, which unfortunately has no research budget at all).

12. No doubt it could be argued that the list of questions came from the Research Community itself. But it was only constructed because RCUK decided that, for the first time in history, the Research Councils would predetermine the specific questions for which researchers in the science base would be granted funding.

13. The Haldane Principle is breaking down. In the case of the Research Councils, it is supposed to mean that the individual Councils, with their own Royal Charters, make funding decisions based on the needs and priorities of the research community. Now questions are being dictated by RCUK, a body that until recently was presided over by a central official.

14. SBS applauds the decision of the current Director General of the Research Councils not to chair the strategy committee of RCUK. We hope he is signalling an intention to restore some measure of the Councils' independence. That the Government perceived a need for RCUK in the first place was a sign of how far attitudes have changed to the independence of the science community.

15. In addition to the need for coordination of scientific work, the Research Councils could usefully coordinate more of their administration. For example, as SBS understands the situation, each Research Council has its own central functions, such as personnel departments, press offices etc. Financial savings could no doubt be made by sharing resources in these areas. A central coordinating body that achieved this would free up funds for science, making the Research Councils even more efficient than they undoubtedly are already.

16. It is not our intention to be unrelentingly negative and to give the impression that we believe RCUK's work is all a waste of time and money. However, we do believe that there is much more to be done to if its expenditure is to be fully justified to the scientific community, to the taxpayer, and of course to Parliament.

January, 2005

Notes and References

¹ *Forward Look 2003: Government funded science, engineering and technology*, DTI, 2003

² *Physics World*, November 2004, pp.9-10.