

george efstathiou **view from the top**

We want our research council back!

On a spring evening in April 2007, I attended a reception on a Thames riverboat celebrating the creation of the Science and Technology Facilities Council. We were told by Tony Blair and his science minister Malcolm Wicks that a new dawn had broken for basic research in the UK. We were assured that neither the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils, nor the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council, would lose money as a result of their merger to form the new body.

But despite the optimism that we felt at the time, an organisation that was launched on a river quickly hit the rocks.

After a rushed and controversial prioritisation exercise, the STFC announced a reduced science programme in July 2008 which hit university groups engaged in astronomy, particle physics and nuclear physics particularly hard. Unfortunately, the revised programme soon fell apart, requiring yet another prioritisation exercise, completed in December 2009. That resulted in savage cuts of about 35 per cent to the grants supporting university groups, the cancellation of even more world-class projects and reductions in the numbers of postdoctoral fellowships and PhD studentships.

All of this happened before we knew of the effects of economic crisis on the science budget. The STFC has left itself uniquely ill-placed among the research councils to absorb further reductions following the comprehensive spending review.

In the many letters I have written about the 'STFC crisis', I have never asked for more money, recognising that would be utterly unrealistic in the circumstances. Instead, I have been lobbying for good governance. The structural difficulties with the STFC were easy to identify and I believe they could have been tackled without such a catastrophic loss of science. Following its formation, the STFC failed to engage constructively with its science community and so was unable to develop coherent scientific and financial strategies that the community could support.

The other research councils are dominated by academic heavyweights, allowing the sacred Haldane principle to operate. Government allocates funds to the research councils, allowing scientists to determine which projects to fund, free of government interference. Unlike the other research councils, the STFC was set up with a reduced council membership of 10 people, four of whom were not university-based academics and a further three who were members of the STFC executive.

The STFC was scrutinised in two reviews commissioned

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in 2007-08. The first by Bill Wakeham warned: "STFC does stand out for the relative lack of members of the scientific community at the highest level. The structure has not best served the community in several branches of science whose input is one level below Council. The Panel therefore recommends that DIUS should broaden the membership of STFC Council to include more stakeholders in the science activity and that the balance between executive presence and non-executive oversight should be redressed."

The government accepted this recommendation. Two members of the executive resigned from the STFC Council and three university-based academics were appointed in April 2009—too late to mitigate the STFC crisis but a step in the right direction.

So it came as a shock when a year later three new members from the business sector were appointed to the STFC Council. Again university academics form a small minority on this body.

Why does this matter? Because in my experience, industry representatives can often provide interesting perspectives, but if they lack understanding of the science they will invariably accept the recommendations of the Executive. If business members form a majority on Council, the Haldane principle can be subtly compromised, which is exactly what has happened.

The STFC needs a scientifically strong Council—competent management is not enough. It is easy to keep within budget by simply cutting things. It is much harder to maximise the science that you can do on a fixed budget. For that you need a scientific strategy and judgement. So it is essential that world-class scientists are involved at the highest level. No other research council relegates its academic heavyweights to lower level committees.

Ever since its creation, the STFC has had a wretched history. And its problems will continue whatever the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review unless these governance issues are addressed. I therefore urge our new science minister David Willetts to spend some time on the STFC, when the hubbub over the spending review dies down.

Don't rely on advice from those responsible for establishing it, they will downplay the problems, instead, listen to our leading scientists. Find out what people actively engaged in research really think. I believe you will find that we want our research council back. It's as simple as that.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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