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It's pie in the blue skies

Andrew King

Judged by soundbites, John Denham seemed a frustrated man at last week's joint launch of the science and innovation White Paper and the government's response to the Sainsbury Review. He was all ready to enthuse over two papers with trendy titles and lofty ambitions, Innovation Nation and Race to the Top, but found himself fielding more questions about the crisis that has engulfed blue-skies research, and UK physics and astronomy in particular [see RF 20/2/2008, p5,6,16-19 via links below].

"Fundamental science is respected both in its own right but also in the long term it is our investment in the ideas that would prove exploitable, and the nature of fundamental science is that you can't be sure which ones will be," Denham is reported to have said. Make what you will of that, but one sure way of messing up the new dawn is to go around upsetting your blue-skies researchers, which the Science and Technology Facilities Council has managed comprehensively. The STFC's projected grants cuts threaten university physics departments with closure, and the community is deeply distrustful at the ranking of more than two-thirds of its current projects as low priority.

These things hit at major elements of Denham's strategy as stated in the two papers, such as producing a scientifically skilled workforce, maintaining the UK's global science reputation, and emphasising its desirability as an international partner.

The row inevitably distracted attention from interesting things in the reports. In an attempt to introduce joined-up thinking on science across departments, the government suggests a 'more robust mechanism' for identifying and protecting departmental R&D budgets. Departments would have to agree amounts and priorities for R&D spending early in the Spending Review process, and would need explicit Treasury permission to make changes.

The White Paper outlines a number of practical measures designed to stimulate innovation. Ironically, many researchers view one of its flagship elements, the Science and Innovation Campuses at Harwell and, er, Daresbury (if there is anything left after the STFC has finished bringing down its ring fencing), as rather more of a threat (to those left outside) than a promise (to the chosen few). They argue that the SICs [sic] could narrow rather than widen contact between businesses and blue-skies researchers excluded from the golden triangle. Furthermore, large government research centres in continental Europe have tended to draw talent and resources away from universities, leaving them enfeebled.

Denham must feel at times that no-one takes much notice of the government's near doubling (in real terms) of the ring-fenced Science Budget since 1997, given the furore over blues-skies research. Certainly, there seemed to be an edge of exasperation in his reported statement: "I am slightly concerned that the impression is being given that a huge swathe of British science is disappearing. I don't believe that is the case. Whether the strategy of the STFC has been communicated to the science community as they might have hoped is another matter."

Physicists and astronomers will be hoping that there is real meaning to his assertion that there will be no major decisions on postdoctoral grants until after the Wakeham report is received.

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