Britain's scientists are mad as hell

Prospect readers will know from Stephen Eales's article in January that the funding of physics and astronomy in Britain is in a mess, writes Andrew King. But how can this be when most agree the government has done well by science, with funding at historically high levels and Britain's international reputation largely restored?

The root of the trouble was the forced marriage last year of two research councils—one responsible for funding "blue-skies" research in universities, the other for administering big government laboratories—to form the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC). Since it is easier to cut research grants than pull funding for big laboratories (which have fixed capital costs), it was inevitable that any give in the system would come from the former. And sure enough, the STFC plans cuts of 25 per cent to physics departments and has threatened to withdraw Britain from international astronomy projects such as the Gemini observatory.

Understandably, scientists are incensed: they point out that slashing university funding will limit Britain's ability to attract foreign scientists and, in the long term, reduce the number of physics graduates (which has been rising). The issue has been raised in parliament, and science minister Ian Pearson and government adviser Keith O'Nions (yes, really) recently faced a select committee grilling. Although physicists will be looking for more than fine words, an admission that the shotgun wedding that is the STFC should get a divorce would be a start.