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Research Fortnight Analysis

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Would Haldane mind, in principle?

Controversial cutbacks in funding for physicists are rekindling the debate over where responsibility for the UK's research agenda should lie—with politicians or with scientists. Nick Dusic argues that it's time for a new consensus.

In late April, on the eve of publication of a damning parliamentary report on science funding, John Denham chose to speak at the Royal Academy of Engineering in London. The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills said he was speaking in response to the "rumbling controversy" over the Science Budget Allocations, which followed last October's Comprehensive Spending Review.

At the heart of the controversy is the Science and Technology Facilities Council, which instigated swingeing cutbacks after receiving less money than it wanted from the government. Leaving aside the way the STFC managed its response, which has drawn much criticism, the shortfall in its allocation has raised the issue of the current standing of the Haldane Principle. This principle, which derives from a report by politician Richard Burdon Haldane in 1918, is often cited as dictating that scientists rather than politicians should determine how research funds are spent (see article below).

Denham, in his speech, was keen to get across what he considers to be the three key elements of the Haldane Principle for the world of the 21st century. First, that researchers are best placed to determine detailed priorities; second, that the government's role is to set the over-arching strategy; and third, that research councils are "guardians of the independence of science".

The following day, 30 April, the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee published its report on the Science Budget Allocations after taking evidence from, among others, Ian Pearson, minister for science and innovation.

"What would you say to give a degree of reassurance," the committee asked Pearson, "that you are not micromanaging the research councils specifically about how they spend the money that has been allocated to them?" Pearson response was unequivocal: "I would say look at the facts and I think the facts demonstrate that we are not looking to micromanage."

Nevertheless, the report from the IUSS committee questioned the extent to which DIUS upheld the Haldane Principle in the light of the department's influence over how the Science Budget is used.

Denham's general speech on science funding and the IUSS committee's more specific report offer useful starting points for a debate on both the principles and practice of government funding of research.

Discussions about the meaning of the Haldane Principle and how it should be applied are hindered by the difficulty of getting hold of the original report and by the way that the principle has emerged and evolved. Furthermore, recent definitions that distinguish between a 'detailed priority' and an 'over-arching strategy', as aired by Denham, can be a problem as the distinction is not always clear. Under different interpretations, the government has used the Haldane Principle to defend itself from recent funding controversies but it has also been attacked for breaking the principle.

The IUSS committee was extremely concerned that what the government thought was an 'over-arching strategy' was actually interference and micro-management. The committee noted that there were a number of new government-determined spending commitments, which included the increase in full economic costs of research (FEC) and the funding of new bodies such as the Energy Technologies Institute and the Technology Strategy Board. These new commitments give rise to problems because they cannot be fully funded without research councils making cuts in other areas.

Added to this, a significant amount of funding was targeted at cross-council thematic research priorities that responded to the Treasury's grand challenges, such as climate change. Pearson admitted to the IUSS committee the need for a debate about the extent to which research funding should be focused on the current challenges facing society and the economy.

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Research councils are in a difficult position; do they respond to government priorities in order to increase their funding or do they maintain a greater degree of independence?

Denham made special reference to the cross-council themes in his speech. He suggests that they do not contravene the Haldane Principle because research councils can decide what to fund within the programmes. However, there has been little debate about the appropriateness of research councils rather than government departments funding this type of research.

In the run up to the Science Budget Allocations, research councils had to submit their delivery plans and funding requests to DIUS for approval. Approval is not a mere formality. The STFC's delivery plan made a fraction of the commitment to the cross-council programmes compared with the plans of other science-based councils. As it happens, the STFC received the smallest increase of the science-based research councils, which resulted in the current funding crisis.

Pearson told the IUSS committee that he would not have approved the STFC's delivery plan unless it contained support for the Daresbury campus. When questioned about the ramifications of the STFC's delivery plan, however, he responded: "It is not the responsibility of government, respecting the Haldane principles [sic], to make detailed decisions in terms of how a research council should allocate its budget. That is up to the STFC and its decision-making processes which involve the scientific community."

The government is right not to intervene in decisions about which projects to fund. However, it should take responsibility for a delivery plan that requires its approval, and for the amount of funding allocated.

Going forward, there needs to be a number of changes if the government is to regain the confidence of the scientific community. And these changes should happen before the next Comprehensive Spending Review.

The interaction between research councils and DIUS needs to be much more transparent so that we are clearer about the degree to which the government is directing decisions, especially on the councils' delivery strategies. It would be reasonable for any guidance from DIUS to the research councils to be documented and made a public record.

The scientific community, especially the governing councils of research councils, should start to regain their independence and scientific freedom. Denham should welcome such moves if he truly wants the councils to be "the guardians of the independence of science".

Overall, a new consensus needs to emerge between the science community and government about the definition and application of the Haldane Principle. The last Science Budget Allocations raised serious issues about the independence of research councils and the accountability of government. It is critical that clearer lines of responsibility are defined.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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The Haldane Principle: a question of interpretation

The Haldane Report, published in 1918, examined the structure and function of the UK government following the first world war. Its recommendations led to the creation of the research councils to administer 'general research', as distinct from research that met the immediate needs of a government department, and to the Haldane Principle, which has continued to evolve ever since.

The principle is often taken to mean that scientists and not politicians should decide how research funds are spent—although it has been open to interpretation. In 2006, the Cooksey Review of UK health research funding, commissioned by the Treasury, examined the Haldane Principle in some detail within its historical overview of government health research policy. The Cooksey Review's interpretation of Haldane supported a greater degree of government control over research policy than is practised.

In relation to the need for 'general research', Cooksey's interpretation was unequivocal. "Crucially, even for this kind of 'research for general use', Haldane did not propose that decisions about it should be taken at arm's-length from government," noted Cooksey. "In fact, he proposed that these decisions should specifically be the responsibility of a government department, only not an 'Administrative Department' that had policy responsibility for the area of research in question. This, indeed, is consistent with the current arrangements, where DTI/OSI [Department of Trade and Industry/Office of Science and Innovation, now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills] is responsible for research for general use. Moreover, it is clear from this that the establishment of research councils to conduct research at 'arm's-length from government' was a step beyond that recommended by Haldane."

In any event, until the 1970s, there seems to have been a general consensus that the Haldane Principle meant that research councils should be at arm's-length from government and that scientists were best placed to

determine their research priorities.

This all changed following publication in 1971 of the Rothschild Report on the organisation and management of government R&D, which was critical of the autonomy of the research councils in respect of applied research. "This is wrong," noted Rothschild. "However distinguished, intelligent and practical scientists may be, they cannot be so well qualified to decide what the needs of the nation are, and their priorities, as those responsible for ensuring that those needs are met. This is why applied R&D must have a customer."

Less than a decade later, funding shifted back to the research councils but government retained greater control of how the money was spent.

In the 1990s, the Haldane Principle's scope was limited to 'day-to-day' decisions by research councils, giving the government the ability to set general policies and direction. The Advisory Board for Research Councils, which was comprised of both independent members and government representatives, was replaced by the Director-General of Research Councils. This led to greater ministerial involvement in the allocation of the science budget and in setting the framework that research councils work within.

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