

LETTER FROM LONDON

## Conservative approach to science



**The new Government will cut spending, but support in some areas must continue**

by Larry Miller

The change of Government in Britain should have a marked if indirect effect on the country's use and administration of science and technology. The main platform on which the Conservatives fought the election has been that of nonintervention, particularly in industry. The theme of the Socialists, while in office, has been that of guided assistance. Under the new Government, therefore, it would seem that if an industry scorns scientific methods it will be left to run down; and unless serious unemployment seems likely no help of any sort will be forthcoming.

But this ignores one of the main problems in Britain today. That is that while the newer industries such as computers, electronics and chemicals are keen to absorb every new idea—whether it be in management or manufacturing techniques—those based on the more traditional crafts, like shipbuilding, metalworking and house building, often lag behind. No government, however much it believes in the dictum of nonintervention, can afford to ignore the laggards. At the very least it must ensure that scientific expertise is available to them when required. The big difference will be in the way the new Government provides what it considers to be the minimum necessary.

The outgoing Government, in one of its several major attempts to inject science and technology into the wayward industries, proposed setting up a \$168 million British Research and Development Corp. It was to have been based on the present Atomic Energy Authority (AEA), which is now judged to have fulfilled much of its original purpose. To the existing AEA would have been added several of the Government's own more industry-oriented research laboratories, and also, the National Research Development Corp. (SN: 2/7, p. 160), which is responsible for ensuring that bright new ideas get taken up by industry.

It now seems likely that this idea will be dropped. The principal objection to the scheme has been that industry would have to sponsor 20 times as much research as it has in the past. British industry is not likely to do this—certainly not in a hurry. Though industry is unafraid of changes, it likes to take them slowly. So even if the idea eventually catches on, the Government would have to provide much of the early nourishment.

Another casualty might be the giant Ministry of Technology itself, though reshaping should suffice. This ministry, with an annual budget of \$540.7 billion,

was the main technological weapon of the outgoing administration. It sponsors advances in computers, machine tools, electronics, telecommunications, electrical and mechanical engineering, vehicles, process plant and shipbuilding. It is also directly responsible for aerospace, guided missiles, nuclear weapons, radar and other electronics. It has also under its wing some of Britain's foremost research laboratories, such as the National Physical Laboratories and National Engineering Laboratory.

What the new shape of the Government research organizations will be is anyone's guess. But a slimming of present establishments seems likely, particularly since the Government is committed to reducing the number of civil servants. One of industry's secondary objections to the proposed forming of BRDC was that the AEA would be artificially buttressed. "If scientists are going spare," a leading industrialist has said, "they should be employed direct by firms." But few firms, in the traditional industries at any rate, have employed more than a handful of scientists.

The Government, no doubt, will opt for the inevitable British compromise. It will obviously intervene less in industry and also probably reduce subsidies to the so-called delicate industries, like computers and shipbuilding. On the other hand, some industries, notably civil aircraft, heavy electricals and cotton textiles, will continue to get grants to protect them against the full blast of international competition.

Possibly the research associations will fare more favorably than in the past. There are some 50 of these, each of which carries out research on behalf of a particular industry. Each derives its income from levies on the industry and from grants received from the Government. The outlook for these organizations has been decidedly pallid under the Socialist administration, for they would have been in direct competition with the proposed BRDC. But with this dropped they should once again come into the limelight.

A previously tried formula might well be tried once again. In this, industry would help itself to science and technology through the medium of the Research Associations, and where there are gaps—as in building technology, civil engineering hydraulics, fire research, fishing activities and environmental pollution, not to mention physics, chemistry and mechanical engineering—they would be filled by the Government.