

Butler – a geological survey in transition

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G I Lumsden, Director from 1985 to 1987. Innes Lumsden was born on 27 June 1926 in Banchory. After taking a degree in Geology in Aberdeen, he joined the Geological Survey of Great Britain in 1949, serving on the field staff in the Lowlands Unit based in Edinburgh. He became District Geologist of the South Lowlands Unit in 1970; Assistant Director for the Land Survey of Scotland and Northern Ireland and officer in charge of the Scottish offices in 1980; and Deputy Director 1982 to 1985. Plate 3

Chapter 5 Butler

The Butler Study Group came about as a direct result of the intense political lobbying that took place during the campaign that the BGS organised against the 1985 NERC Corporate Plan. Throughout the campaign, there were three issues that were given prominence: the threat of reduced funding for research in the geological sciences, the proposal in the Corporate Plan to divide the BGS up into five separate bodies under the direct management of a Director of Science based at NERC HQ in Swindon, and the matter of whether the BGS should be removed from the NERC. All three were taken up with different emphases in the weeks immediately after the publication of the Corporate Plan.

Friends of the BGS from all parts of industry and academia wrote to and lobbied Ministers, the Prime Minister and their Members of Parliament, while many BGS staff also made contact with their MPs as a result of the decision to do so taken at the senior staff meeting on 18 January, 1985. All pursued one or more of the three main themes.

The idea of instituting an enquiry to investigate them can be traced back to a speech that Professor John Sutton made in January, but it was a Member of Parliament who can take the credit for making it actually happen. As early as January 1985, Dr John Bowman issued a warning to staff that they must not make direct representations to Ministers, but because of the wide areas around the numerous BGS offices within which staff lived, many constituencies were covered, including ones held by Ministers. Probably the most important, though, was Rutland and Melton, for which the backbencher Michael Latham was the MP. He was already known to BGS staff who had served overseas, because of the help he provided over the nationality issue. Changes in the laws on nationality from 1970 onwards, in particular, the British Nationality Act 1981, had made a large number of children who had been born overseas when their parents had been serving abroad for BGS ineligible for British citizenship, and he had campaigned on their behalf.

In March 1985 Michael Latham responded to a letter about the NERC Corporate Plan from two of his constituents, by visiting Keyworth to see the Director and other senior staff in order to gain background information. He decided that this was a matter he would take up and wrote a long letter to Peter Brooke, who, as the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Department of Education and Science, was the Science Minister. In the letter, dated 18 March, Michael Latham raised several specific issues for the minister to address, but strongly expressed the view that an enquiry should be set up under an independent expert as soon as possible to study the fundamental role and purpose of the BGS, including any question of privatisation. He also suggested that the BGS should leave the NERC and deal directly with a Government department, and urged Peter Brooke to discuss the matter very soon with Mr Hugh Fish, the NERC Chairman, and set the enquiry under way.

Mr Brooke's reply came on 30 April. It was fulsome and reassuring. He stressed that the NERC Corporate Plan did not include any plans to destroy geological sciences or the Geological Survey and that the precise reporting arrangements under the Directors of Science were still the subject of discussion and consultation. A meeting of Council members was scheduled for May, when the Director of BGS would be present, to discuss the most critical issue of the management structure for the BGS. However, though he dealt individually with the seven specific points raised in Michael Latham's letter, the one issue to which he made no reference at all was the enquiry.

Lobbying continued. Articles and leaders appeared in both *New Scientist* and *Nature* severely critical of the NERC's handling of the BGS and the geological sciences in general. The President of the Geological Society, writing in the Introduction to his 1984 Annual Report in April 1985, made what he described as a battle cry for the geosciences in which he included support for the British Geological Survey. His contention was that the bureaucratic administration of the NERC appeared to be determined to destroy the scientific autonomy of the BGS. There was a steady flow of letters from the Geological Society, the Institution of Geologists and their members and senior geologists in industry and from overseas, local geological societies and even archaeologists, to Sir Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, and the Prime Minister.

One of the most damaging incidents to the NERC was the resignation of Professor John Dewey from Council. In his press release of 22 February he said: 'In my view, the fundamental strategic role can be served only by dissociating the British Geological Survey from the NERC, and its Director, traditionally and currently a distinguished earth scientist, to be given line management responsibility directly through the Department of Energy.' He went on further to suggest that a case could be made for transferring the basic earth science support role from the NERC to the Science

and Engineering Research Council (SERC).

Michael Latham, in the meantime, started his campaign of Parliamentary Questions. On 29 April, one to the Prime Minister brought a sharp rebuff; but the second, on 21 May, brought a slightly better response from Peter Brooke, the Science Minister, who is reported in Hansard as saying:

I understand my Hon. Friend's concern, although I cannot go all the way with him on the precise subject of an enquiry. I agree that there is a case for a study into the national needs of geological surveying activities, and I shall ensure that that suggestion is sympathetically considered.

Michael Latham had now a reply to all the points he raised in his letter, but sympathetic consideration of an idea was not the same as implementing it. More work still had to be done to make the enquiry happen.

The NERC Council, however, had now taken the matter up, and at its June meeting the Chairman announced to Council that he was talking to the Chairman of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils about the precise way an enquiry should be done. On 5 July Peter Brooke wrote to Sir Peter Kent, a former Chief Geologist for BP and a past Chairman of NERC, in answer to a letter he had written to the Prime Minister on 24 April. In strict confidence, he told him that there was to be a study of the way geological surveying was carried out. He said that in very broad terms the primary concern of the study would be to establish a considered and authoritative view of the need and demand. He expected that the study would examine in consultation with actual and potential customers (both inside and outside Government departments) the extent to which there is a market outside the NERC for the 'products' of geological surveying. He said it would be necessary to ascertain how much the customers would be prepared to pay for these services. Finally, a view would be formed as to how much of the surveying work would be properly funded from the Department's Science Vote.

During July, Michael Latham asked a series of Parliamentary Questions, most of which were answered by Peter Brooke. His first, however, on 19 July, was to the Prime Minister. He asked her what response she had made to the letter dated 24 April from Sir Peter Kent, and was told that a study of geological surveying was to be carried out, arranged jointly by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils and the NERC. It was now out in the open.

The issue of the enquiry, which Michael Latham pursued so relentlessly, concerned not only whether there should be one, but also the scope of its terms of reference. The BGS wanted them to be broad and address the proposed fragmentation of the BGS, its removal from the NERC and the implied reduction in funding for the geological sciences in the NERC Corporate Plan. Indeed, when Professor John Sutton first raised the matter of an enquiry in a speech back in January 1985 it was with the idea that it should be broadly based and take on such matters. Once NERC HQ had conceded that an enquiry was inevitable it was quick to state its position. Mr Fish took the opportunity to explain it in a letter to Sir Peter Kent, dated 31 July, which he wrote after being sent a copy of Sir Peter's letter to the Prime Minister. He expressed the view that he hoped the continual pressure that the geological community and others were bringing to bear would bring forth the extra resources which were required to improve the wellbeing of geological sciences in the UK. In other words, the NERC was not going to provide it. He also told Sir Peter that there was no enthusiasm in Whitehall for the option of removing the BGS from the NERC and putting it into a Government department. However, there is some evidence from the wording of the letter that the NERC was beginning to back off the idea of splitting the BGS up into five parts and making them answerable directly to the new Director of Science. Sir Peter's response to the Chairman, written early in August, as he said, more in sorrow than in anger, is interesting. He made three brief points. He pleaded that the NERC did not appoint second-rate applicants to the post of Director of Science.

Secondly, he expressed fears for the continued existence of a national geological mapping programme if responsibility for it stayed with the NERC under the present circumstances, and, lastly, he made the point that the post of Director of the BGS had always been a full-time job and could not be done by someone who also had responsibility for university research.

An announcement to the press about the study, giving the terms of reference and membership of the Study Group, was made from NERC HQ, eventually, on 17 October 1985.

The main task of the Study Group was to consider the requirements for geological surveying rather than the structure of the BGS itself, and a consideration of the relationship between the BGS and the NERC was deemed outside the group's formal terms of reference. Michael Latham, however, had not given up on this and wrote to Sir David Phillips, Chairman of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, about it on 18 September. Sir David's reply, not sent until 21 November, a month after the press release about the Study Group, stated that it would be for the members of the Study Group to decide whether to consider evidence on this subject. The BGS now had an opportunity to raise this matter in the evidence it presented to the Study Group.

The Study Group, under the chairmanship of Sir Clifford Butler FRS, the Vice-Chancellor of Loughborough University from 1975 to December 1985, was established in the autumn of 1985 by Sir David Phillips, Chairman of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils and Mr Hugh Fish, Chairman of NERC. The Study Group's terms of reference were:

To assess the UK needs for geological surveying over the next 5-10 years — its scale, nature and quality — having regard to the longer-term prospects for public expenditure, and in particular:

1. To determine the geological surveying activities needed to underpin basic and strategic research in the earth sciences and in other related research funded through the DES Science Vote.
2. To determine the scale, nature and quality of geological surveying activities for which customers, including Government departments as proxy customers, recognise a need, and for which they could reasonably be expected to pay.
3. To reach conclusions concerning the total resources accordingly required and to suggest the allocation of responsibility for providing them.

The men appointed to the Study Group were chosen because they were not directly or professionally involved in the NERC structure or its management. They were as independent and as impartial as you could get. Sir Clifford was a physicist, Sir Alan Muir Wood FRS an engineer, Dr Charles Suckling FRS a chemist, Sir Frederick Warner FRS a chemical engineer and only Sir Alwyn Williams FRS a geologist. Secretary to the group was Eric Brown, the former BGS Secretary.

Sir Clifford's plan was to collect written evidence up to March 1986. He began by visiting the BGS to speak to the Director at Keyworth in November 1985. In the next three months the Study Group would visit BGS offices to talk to staff and management, carry out the overseas visits and see representatives of other relevant institutions. He expected to submit his final report in October 1986. Up to June he was on schedule.

Not surprisingly, many of the written submissions received in the early days urged the Study Group to extend their study beyond the guidelines originally set for them and to include the organisational position of the BGS. Consequently, Sir Clifford went back to Sir David Phillips and Mr Fish for advice. The letter he received from Sir David is published in the Report, and Sir Clifford chose to

interpret it as giving him the green light to broaden his remit and include consideration of the future institutional arrangements for geological surveying; in other words, whether the BGS should be in or outside the NERC.

The Study Group took evidence from staff, management and the trades unions within the BGS and from a wide range of external sources. Amongst the latter, probably the most influential was the Royal Society, where six of the most eminent geoscientists in the UK met with the Study Group. The Study Group also visited national geological surveys in Australia, Canada, France, United States of America and West Germany. They interviewed the Director of the Netherlands Geological Survey and received written comments from other European surveys. They took account of the work of the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland and considered the possible role of universities and polytechnics in geological surveying.

From the beginning, the NERC strove to prevent the BGS from submitting its 1985 Strategic Plan to the Study Group as evidence. Gordon Smith and David Gray, had prepared an abridged version of it specifically for use in situations such as this. On 5 August 1985, well before the announcement was made of the establishment of the Butler Study Group, Dr Bowman wrote to the Director after having been sent a copy of the abridged version. He wondered what the BGS now intended to do with the document and said that some comments coming to him from staff in the BGS and in other institutes led him to believe that the document was causing a certain amount of disquiet. He said, 'So far as I am aware the document has no official status and has not been approved by anybody'. He suggested that it might be helpful in the present circumstances if it was made clear to all concerned, as well as to those who prepared it, that it is a document for discussion and had not received any official blessing whatsoever.

Malcolm Brown's reply was immediate. He explained that the abridged version that had been prepared from the full Strategic Plan would be sent to interested parties on the understanding that it did not yet reflect official policy, but was a paper of ideas. He further said that it was a substantial item of evidence that could be rapidly produced for any review body that may ultimately be set up to consider the future of the BGS. Dr Bowman's reaction to this, when the Butler Study Group was up and running, was to inform Director that he was not allowed to use the Strategic Plan as evidence. In response, Innes Lumsden ([Plate 3](#)), who became Director on Malcolm Brown's retirement in October 1985, rewrote the annual Forward Look for 1986. This incorporated all the main elements of the Strategic Plan and was allowed as evidence. It became Annex 10 in the Butler report. To make doubly sure, however, the Union Side, which claimed some degree of ownership of it, having started the process off, based their submission to the Study Group on it. This was presented by Tony Reedman. Sir Clifford and his colleagues liked it immensely. After all, over sixty hours of meetings of the Strategic Plan Working Party, and many additional hours of staff time spent preparing and discussing contributions to it, represented a massive investment of time and thought in the very subject they were investigating.

Sir Clifford did not finish his report on schedule. By October 1986 it was announced that it would be late, but was still expected by Christmas. Final papers from the BGS were still being prepared and the Study Group, at that stage, had plans to hold further meetings with the Royal Society as well as the NERC. When there was no sign of the report early in 1987 various individuals contacted their MPs about it. Eventually, a message came out of the Department of Education and Science that the report was due to be presented to the chairmen of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils and the NERC in the spring of that year. The report itself is dated March 1987 and advance copies were distributed among NERC officials, Council members and the main customer departments during that month. No one in the BGS, even the Director, was allowed to see a copy and the trades union (IPCS) Branch Chairman protested about this to the NERC Secretary, Dr Eileen Buttle, asking to see a copy. Her reply was that only a proof copy without appendices had been distributed. The report was

scheduled to go to the ABRC meeting on 1 April. After that it would go to the Secretary of State for Education and Science accompanied by the NERC and ABRC response to it. He alone would decide on publication. The NERC/ABRC response recommended publication, but there was a general election on 11 June, causing several weeks of delay, and the report was not published until 8 July.

The summary of the recommendations runs to 55 paragraphs, starting with the words:

After consideration of the evidence given to us, and with the benefit of our own investigations, we are satisfied that the British Geological Survey (BGS) is an important national resource but that changes are necessary if it is to make its full potential contribution.

The report recommended that the BGS work programme be divided into three parts: a 'Core Programme', a 'Responsive Programme', both more or less as described in the 1985 Strategic Plan, and a 'Scientific Programme'. This last was to be funded by grants from the NERC Science Budget and a 20% surcharge put on contract work carried out for Government departments. It was an attempt to get the departments to comply with a requirement of the Rothschild transfer to pay a 10% levy on the commissioned research contracts in order to fund underpinning research. Among the many other recommendations were:

- The BGS should give first priority within the Core Programme to the development of the National Geosciences Data Centre.
- The Core Programme should be managed as a three-year rolling programme.
- The Core Programme should be publicly funded by an annual earmarked grant of £15 million at 1985/86 prices which should be reviewed annually.
- The Core Programme should be financed in part from earnings derived from the sale of data and services.
- The BGS should be allowed to undertake contract work within the Core Programme up to £3 million p.a.
- The earmarked grant for the Core Programme should not be reduced on account of income from the Responsive Programme.
- There should be an additional grant of £0.75 million for three years to help meet the cost of voluntary early retirement.
- The BGS should have its own corporate identity.
- The BGS should be managed as a provider of an essential service needing research to maintain its quality and not as a research institution providing service as an extra.
- The Director of the BGS should be its Chief Executive and should be regarded as HM Government's principal adviser on geological matters.
- There should be a Board of the BGS, responsible for both policy and management, with an independent part-time chairman appointed by the Prime Minister.
- The membership of the Board should include the Director, three or four of the most senior members of the full-time staff plus the Director of Earth Sciences as a non-executive member. Other non-executives should stand in their own right, rather than be representatives. Assessors should be drawn from the important Government departments.
- The Board of the BGS should be close to Government and not separated from it by intermediate layers of management. The Board should be permitted to submit proposals for the funding of major and important new projects at the time of the annual budget review.
- The BGS should be established alongside, and on a broadly similar basis to the Ordnance Survey; that is, outside NERC, thus ensuring that it would be close to Government, with direct access to a senior Minister.
- Until such time as the latter could be arranged the BGS should become an independent corporate body receiving grant-in-aid from the Department of Education and Science or

possibly NERC.

Interestingly, the Study Group picked up two difficult issues that had also been troublesome to the Strategic Plan Working Party. One was the matter of funding for the mapping of the continental shelf. The Strategic Plan firmly placed this activity in the Core Programme, but, because it was funded by a commission from the Department of Energy, a category of core-commissioned projects had to be devised for it. Butler agreed that this work was appropriate for the Core Programme, but suggested that either the Department of Energy should continue to pay for it or the funding should be transferred back to the BGS. They also picked up on the geomagnetism issue, suggesting that this and, perhaps, global seismology, were not appropriate for the Core Programme. They recommended that a detailed investigation, carried out by independent earth scientists, might find that they and some other research projects might be better transferred to a separate research programme or even outside the BGS.

Most BGS staff were impressed by the report. The Study Group had taken up all the main issues that they had been fighting for and had found in their favour. No one could accuse the Study Group of not being impartial. There was, therefore, a high level of expectation that the recommendations of the report would be implemented. It was evident also why the report had taken such a long time to appear. Sir Clifford had been concerned that if they were to recommend that the BGS were to be taken out of the NERC, the Study Group had to find an acceptable home for it. They discovered early that there was no obvious home in any Government department for the BGS because of the breadth of its remit. Talks with officials in several departments revealed that most seemed to be unwilling to take on the extra burden of the BGS. This was the time of the Government's drive to reduce public spending by cutting the size of the civil service. Although there had been some privatisations at that time, policy regarding the development of Government agencies was not fully developed. The Ordnance Survey was effectively a small department with a budget directly from the Treasury, but responsible to Government through the Department of the Environment. This was the Study Group's preferred option for the BGS, though they considered variations on it. It had the advantage of making the BGS free standing within Government, without tying it in to any one department.

The NERC had proceeded with their plans for a centralised management structure, and Professor J C Briden had been appointed to the post of Director of Earth Sciences in March 1986. By then, the argument over the proposed fragmentation of the BGS, which had been fought hard by Malcolm Brown, with the strong support of many influential people in the community, appeared to have been won. In any event, the recommendations of the Butler Study Group were strongly against both fragmentation of the BGS and the introduction of the additional tier of management implicit in the new NERC structure. Butler was also disapproving of the downgrading of the post of Director from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Professor Briden, therefore, headed a management structure that had a unified BGS under him. He wrote to all staff on publication of the Butler report pointing out the very obvious opportunities offered by Butler, but also signalling the dangers. The fairly obvious one, that the BGS might be taken out of the NERC from under him, he did not mention. However, he did say that the Department of Education and Science was now taking the lead on it and would be discussing the report in Whitehall and elsewhere. Again, this was good news for staff, who feared that the report would stick at the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, and it confirmed information published in an Office Notice in June 1987 that submission to the Minister was delayed by the general election. Independent confirmation that Whitehall was, in fact, dealing with the report came in October, when Malcolm Rifkind, the Secretary of State for Scotland, wrote to a member of staff who lived in his constituency to say that the Department of Education and Science was considering the report and was involved in wide-ranging discussions with departments which had major contracts with the BGS, including the Scottish Development Department. Then, in October 1987, Robert Jackson, who had become Science Minister after the general election, said, in answer to Parliamentary Questions from

Michael Latham and Sir Trevor Skeet, that a statement would be made by the Secretary of State for Education and Science when the consultations were completed.

The BGS had to wait until November 1988 for the consultation process to be completed and the promised announcement made.

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