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Andrew Miller MP
Chair
Science & Technology Committee
House of Commons

26 October 2012

Dear Andrew,

I understand that your Science & Technology Committee is planning soon to take oral evidence on the proposed merger of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and National Oceanography Centre, to create a new (yet to be named) 'Centre'. The consultation document on the merger, published by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), includes proposals for the research objectives of a combined organisation.

The Environmental Audit Committee has a number of major concerns about the merger and its possible consequences, in the light of our recent inquiry on the Arctic. Our report, Protecting the Arctic, was published last month, and we are awaiting the Government Response. We would be grateful if your committee were able to take our concerns — discussed below — into account in the course of your inquiry.

There will inevitably be issues about the shape and scale of future research in the Antarctic if a merger proceeds. There will also be issues about the scale of any synergies between marine and polar research, and whether a merger would or would not benefit those synergies (our inquiry identified the links between climate changes in the Arctic and drivers operating at lower ocean latitudes such as the Atlantic’s thermo-haline circulation). These may be issues that your committee would look at. The purpose of this letter, however, is to highlight two areas of concern that flow directly from our Arctic inquiry — the need to protect existing NERC commitments for Arctic-specific research, and the dangers of a disproportionate focus on removing risk for natural resource commercial exploitation in the region.

The need for Arctic-focused research

In our Protecting the Arctic report we established that the UK’s Arctic research is very well regarded, not least because of its willingness to consider the read-across between Antarctic and Arctic science, and we highlighted the importance of an active UK scientific community working in the Arctic which gives the UK a direct presence on Arctic issues. We identified the value of further research on potential climate ‘tipping points’, such as the melting ice-cap and methane emissions from frozen ground and seabeds; which present enormous risks of dangerous climate change on a global scale.

BAS operates NERC’s research station on Svalbard in the Arctic. We took oral and written evidence from NERC during our inquiry. They explained their objectives for their £15m Arctic research programme for 2011-2015. BAS’s Head of Arctic Office told us that that

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1. BAS/NERC Merger Consultation Document, Natural Environment research Council
2. Protecting the Arctic, Second Report of Session 2012-13, HC 171
3. HC 171, para 147
4. HC 171, para 148
5. HC 171, Ev 62-67
6. HC 171, Ev 159
rate of expenditure was about five times what it was a decade ago.\textsuperscript{8} It would focus on “improving [our] capability to predict changes in the Arctic, particularly over timescales of months to decades, including regional impacts and the potential for feedbacks on the global Earth System”, and NERC identified specific underpinning research objectives.\textsuperscript{9} That £15m Arctic research programme is vitally important and should not be put at risk following any merger. Indeed, there is significant scope for further research, including on Arctic ecosystems which the BAS Head of Arctic Office considered would be a sensible future development.\textsuperscript{10} The then FCO Minister for Arctic matters highlighted to us the scope for further Arctic research, on ‘black carbon’, pollutants and biodiversity, which could increase the UK’s influence in the region.\textsuperscript{11}

It is not completely clear from NERC’s consultation document, however, whether a merger might at some stage put such Arctic research programmes at risk. The document speaks of a need to deal with “growing international scientific competition and more constrained funding resources”.\textsuperscript{12} An aim, it seems, is “securing efficiency savings by combining similar activities and creating a single management structure”.\textsuperscript{13} It notes that consolidation of some corporate services functions of the two organisations would be “essential”,\textsuperscript{14} but also that an objective is “strengthening ... operational flexibility to plan, operate and secure efficiencies across all areas of the new Centre’s mission in the context of the constrained resources” [our emphasis added].\textsuperscript{15} Worryingly, the document provides no information on expected financial savings from the merger, arguing that it would be premature to offer figures at this consultation stage.\textsuperscript{16} That leaves us with a concern that savings would extend beyond administrative overheads into frontline research itself.

The minister for universities and science told the House on 23 October that “any changes would have no effect on the UK’s commitment to scientific excellence in Antarctica nor on the existing footprint of scientific bases and research ships in the South Atlantic”.\textsuperscript{17} Although in response to a question on the Antarctic, that leaves open a question on the position of Arctic research. And there is of course a concern that it would be possible that Arctic (and indeed Antarctic) research could be squeezed by NERC later on, whether the merger proceeded or not.

Risks of a research strategy aimed at de-risking development of the Arctic

Our Protecting the Arctic report highlighted the profound environmental and climate change risks from oil and gas extraction in the Arctic, and recommended that there should be a moratorium on drilling until certain risk-reduction conditions were satisfied,\textsuperscript{18} and that the Government should seek to use its position as an observer state on the Arctic Council to bring such a moratorium about.\textsuperscript{19}

It is extremely concerning, therefore, to see in the consultation document:

“The oceans and the polar regions (particularly the Arctic) are ‘frontier’ environments where, of necessity, there will be increasing economic activity in the coming decades — not least because of increasing pressures on natural resources.”\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} HC 171, para 148 and Ev 159
\item \textsuperscript{8} HC 171, Q 264
\item \textsuperscript{9} HC 171, Ev 159 (paras 3-5)
\item \textsuperscript{10} HC 171, Q 259
\item \textsuperscript{11} HC 171, para 149
\item \textsuperscript{12} BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 14
\item \textsuperscript{13} BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 15
\item \textsuperscript{14} BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 40
\item \textsuperscript{15} BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 15
\item \textsuperscript{16} BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 4
\item \textsuperscript{17} HC Deb 23 October 2012, col 851W
\item \textsuperscript{18} HC 171, para 106
\item \textsuperscript{19} HC 171, para 155
\item \textsuperscript{20} BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 18
\end{itemize}
"A long term vision is needed", among other things, “to equip UK business and UK investors with the edge needed for de-risking major investment decisions in hostile, unfamiliar environments.”[21] [our emphasis added]

The merged Centre would seek to “maximise pull-through of science to commercial and operational use”.[22] [our emphasis added]

In similar vein, during our inquiry NERC told us:

“At present there is some disconnect between industry and the science base in the UK. The key issues are that the Arctic environment is very poorly understood, long term data series are very sparse and it is highly likely that there will be surprises and tipping points (abrupt irreversible changes in the environment). The NERC Arctic Research Programme, which aims to improve capabilities for predicting changes in the Arctic, as well as understanding the implications of Arctic climate change for policymakers, is an excellent start but much more monitoring and research is required to reduce the levels of uncertainty and hence risk. Much of the necessary research can and should be done through international collaboration but this still requires the UK to invest in the relevant programmes.”[23] [our emphasis added]

Research in the Arctic is essential to allow a better understanding of the environmental and climate change risks and to identify how such risks might be mitigated. While such research might incidentally make it easier for those engaged in shipping, fisheries and oil and gas extraction, NERC’s research should not explicitly facilitate commercial resource exploitation. Whether or not a merger proceeds, the Government should ensure that NERC’s objectives (and BAS’s objectives or any new Centre’s objectives) should not be directed towards ‘de-risking’ the exploitation of natural resources in the Arctic (or indeed, for that matter, the exploitation of the oceans).

In view of the issues raised here, and in the absence so far of a compelling case for the organisational rationalisation, I consider that the merger should not proceed.

I am copying this letter to the minister, Rt Hon David Willetts MP, and to the chair of the NERC Council, Edmund Wallis.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Walley MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee

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[21] BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 19
[22] BAS/NOC Merger Consultation Document, para 21
[23] HC 171, Ev 159 (para 17)