

## Lost in translation

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In 1767, Joseph Priestley, the British scientist, invented soda water. Several years later, the process to produce it was patented – by Johann Jacob Schwappe, a German jeweller. This mix of great discoveries and a failure to exploit them commercially has long been a staple of UK science. A report published on Thursday into innovation centres sets out how to change that.

**Lord Mandelson**, business secretary, has already accepted the recommendations put forward by Hermann Hauser, a technology entrepreneur, for a network of centres broadly equivalent to the Fraunhofer Institutes in Germany. The new centres would focus on technologies that have the greatest development potential, with a view to translating the research into business applications.

Mr Hauser is right to say that the UK must focus its efforts. There are now more than 50 technology and innovation centres. Some are internationally competitive; others have suffered from small-scale investment and short-term funding. While the new elite group will need critical mass, not all the centres can be part of it.

For this is not a time to spread government support too thinly. Like other elements of public spending that have not been ring-fenced, **science funding** will come under ferocious pressure when serious public spending cuts are revealed after the election. With resources limited, the priority should be to concentrate on areas where there are significant business opportunities and the UK enjoys technical leadership.

The Hauser plan deserves to succeed. It should even survive beyond the election, no matter who wins, since it chimes with the policies of both main parties. Mr Hauser's call for predictable long-term funding for the network may not be doomed after all.

Yet we have been here before. Ahead of the 1992 election, both main parties put forward plans to bridge the innovation gap through Newton Institutes (Labour) or Faraday Centres (Conservatives). But within months of having regained power, the Tories rejected the idea. No wonder the technology centres left to develop on a more informal basis have not fully met the aims of the original plan.

In the event of the network being created, Mr Hauser suggests the centres be named in honour of James Clerk Maxwell, the Scottish mathematician and physicist. Perhaps. But calling them after **Joseph Priestley** might be an even better way of making sure they never lose sight of their mission.

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