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ESF—low budget but higher profile

A EUROPEAN SCIENCE FOUNDATION (ESF) moves closer to reality with the recent meeting in Stockholm of representatives of almost all western European countries at which, after strong competition from Dublin and Leiden, Strasbourg was chosen as the site of the foundation's offices. The general outlines of the statutes were also approved and the next meeting of administrators will be in November at which time the constitution should have been drafted. Membership now seems to be resolving itself—only Portugal (an understandable and presumably temporary absence) was missing from western Europe, Finland sent an observer and Yugoslavia has had second thoughts and dropped out. "The door is open", one delegate said, "for eastern Europe to join, and it would be my hope that within a few years the membership would be truly pan-European". Within a year a President and a Secretary-General should be installed and a secretariat of about ten is anticipated in Strasbourg.

The ESF has had an unusual history and it bears a deceptive name. It was created out of a desire to pre-empt, rather than in obvious response to an immediate need. Administrators throughout Europe saw the growing danger, a few years ago, of a deadening hand from the European Economic Community (EEC) seizing science policy and attempting to run science from Brussels. This caused alarm for two reasons: nobody had much stomach for Brussels bureaucracy and international science policy making cannot stop at the frontiers of the Common Market. The ESF thus emerged to pre-empt the EEC—it is freely admitted that the driving force was fear that the community would otherwise do something of its own. The title is somewhat of a misnomer since, at least in English-speaking countries, ESF suggests a European version of the American National Science Foundation. This it is not. Science has its more continental meaning of learning (the British Academy and the Royal Society are both involved), and it is not planned that the ESF should hand out grants for research.

Is all of this a good thing? Scientists in general display little interest in supranational schemes, whether international or regional, until they can see concrete examples of benefit to themselves that can be obtained no other way. Multinational ventures in providing expensive facilities are obviously approved by many, but international associations to cover specialisations are more ambiguously viewed and the ESF will fall into this category. To the extent that they organise grand conferences, publish bulletins and attempt to impose standards they are often ineffectual and even disliked. Their lack of funds for the support of research writes them off for many for whom the only organisations worth respecting are fund-giving organisations. And yet they fulfil one purpose which alone justifies their existence—that of representation direct to

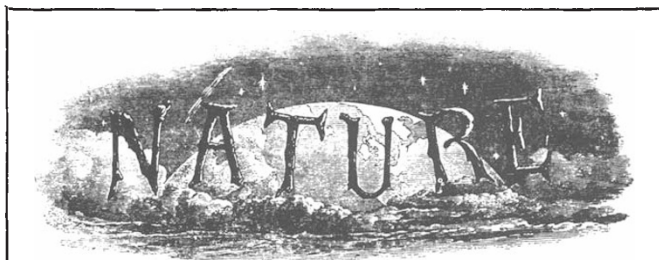
governments. An international union may mean nothing to a scientist in an affluent and enlightened country, but to one in less happy circumstances it may mean the moral support that leads to a government grant, permission to work abroad for a spell or even such mundanities as the price of an airline ticket.

It is to this mode of working that the ESF should try to restrict itself. If it is seen to be an inexpensive operation (with a budget remaining below the half-million dollar mark), which can act quickly as a lobby for scientists when rational intervention is needed and which can act as a matrix on to which multinational schemes can be assembled but off which they can rapidly be removed, then it deserves support. If it attempts to become more grandiose, and a hunting ground for the power brokers and bureaucrats of science, it must be stopped by scientists themselves taking action.

Between now and November the administrators have one important job to do—to increase scientists' awareness of the existence of the ESF. A press release about the selection of Strasbourg had yet to reach Britain, a week after the meeting ended. When Sir Brian Flowers (Flora Europea as one wag described him) announced the selection to a dinnerful of physicists the stirring of coffee cups continued unabated. There is no plan that the articles of the constitution should be open for any public discussion before November. This last is particularly unfortunate. Although the point is made that they will in the main be boring, they must inevitably contain a description of what the foundation can and cannot do. Too often scientists exert themselves with organisations only to find themselves up against administrative answers—"we have no charter to do this", "we would like to help but our constitution forbids" and so on. It would be good to think that here was one organisation which was understood by European scientists before it began.

Nobody yet knows what the ESF will do. It will do nothing at all unless scientists can be persuaded to see its value and to use it intelligently. This means a higher profile in the next few months.

100 years ago



THE President of the Institution of Civil Engineers and Mrs. Harrison held a reception on Tuesday evening in the western gallery of the International Exhibition, at which over two thousand guests were present. In addition to the picture galleries and rooms containing machinery in motion, the west quadrant was open, and in it were placed illustrations of recent scientific inventions specially lent for the evening. With the exception of Mr. Crook's experiments showing attraction and repulsion accompanying radiation, and Tisley and Spiller's compound pendulum apparatus, all were applications of scientific inventions to the wants of life, if wicked war may be included among our wants, for Sir W. Armstrong, and other firms, sent models of appliances for the hydraulic mounting of large guns, whereby they can be placed in position with ease.

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