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Science in the EEC still a problem

If there is one thing on which all involved European scientists and administrators agree, it is that a research and development policy for the European Economic Community is proving a mighty difficult thing to bring forth. There are many reasons for this. One is that there have long been doubts that the community of nine nations should be concerned other than peripherally in basic research—institutions such as the European Science Foundation, the European Molecular Biology Laboratory and CERN draw from a wider range of nations. Another is that applied science and technology policy is difficult to devise in the absence of a broad community-wide economic policy and the sort of political union which makes British taxpayers less agitated if the R & D funds they provide lead to the establishment of new industry in, say, Italy. Finally, the policy must take note of already existing community laboratories at Geel, Petten, Ispra and Karlsruhe—the so-called Joint Research Centre—a hangover from Euratom days when there was a naive and erroneous belief that the then community members, already lavishly equipped with their own nuclear research laboratories, would have work for yet another lavishly-equipped and wide open facility.

Add to this differences in the aspirations of larger and smaller nations and the tiny dimensions of the community's R & D budget in comparison with those of individual nations (1½% of the combined non-defence R & D budget of member states), and you might reasonably wonder whether it was worth the community persisting in trying to keep a scientific programme going. In July 1977, however, the Commission of the Community had a go at bringing some new order into the science and technology programme, with a document devoted to intentions for 1977-80 and draft resolutions and decisions embodying these intentions (*Nature* 268, 96). The House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities has been considering the evolving policy and hearing evidence from scientists with European interests. Their report is now published (Commons Paper 37; £2.60). For those who imagine that any committee of Lords could hardly get to grips with such an esoteric matter, it should be added that the committee comprised several scientists and engineers, including Lords Ashby, Hinton and Zuckerman.

It was perhaps unfortunate that the committee had completed its gathering of evidence before the Commission's report was published, for although there were some interesting presentations on the European dimension to science and a particularly spirited contribution from Professor Pierre Aigrain, it is difficult to see some of the committee's conclusions on the community document emerging very clearly from their earlier deliberations; indeed one draft decision on industrial research which the committee commends does not seem to have been the subject of any discussion whatsoever. Even so, it is possible to discern from the general drift of the evidence that the community is of most value when it is used simply to co-ordinate national research ('concerted action'), some value in financial support of domestic projects of community-wide interest ('in-

direct action') and at its most problematical when the research is done in the Joint Research Centre ('direct action'). Not least of the problems in the last case is the bureaucratic constraint imposed on the actions of the director at Ispra which gives him less freedom than a laboratory director might reasonably expect. The freedom of Sir John Kendrew at EMBL to run his own show was not lost on the committee.

What, then, to do about the JRC? The community's document recommends, somewhat bravely, a mixed diet of nuclear safety, new energy sources, environment, resources and services. The Lords' committee suggest simply a "useful role in carrying out work not done elsewhere and, for example, 'ungrateful' research"—the latter being long-term unspectacular research. This, if anything, seems a recipe for even more dissatisfaction; a huge research laboratory devoted to unwanted projects is hardly likely to find a director able to give it even nominal cohesion or to prevent it from slipping rapidly into oblivion.

It is, however, the committee's views on forecasting which leave most to be desired. Some years ago the community established a group called Europe+30 to look into whether there should be long-term forecasting capacity, together with an Office of Technology Assessment, in the EEC. The group, under Lord Kennet, made its report in 1975 (now published in edited form as *The Futures of Europe* by C.U.P.). Its recommendations included the establishment of a permanent unit of between 30 and 70 people looking at all issues of concern to the community. Lord Kennet had a tough time when he appeared before the committee, which on that day notably lacked the scientists mentioned earlier. He or his team were accused of misuse of the English language, superficiality, amateurism, exceeding their brief and so on. But after the committee had heard from Lord Kennet and before the report was written, the community made its own move on forecasting. It proposed an attenuated version of Europe+30 called FAST—a forecasting-and-assessment-in-science-and-technology programme. This, as its name implies, would be restricted to one sector and would accordingly have a much smaller staff, probably of ten.

The Lords' committee, noticeably sceptical towards Europe+30, claims that FAST will be too diluted to be of value to the community. This is not argued out at all, and indeed could conceivably have gone the other way—that work in one sector would be more concentrated and hence of more value to the community. What is suggested in place of FAST is a scientific adviser, or team, reporting direct to the President. This is difficult to take seriously, particularly coming from Britain where, for better or worse, a scientific adviser reporting direct to the Prime Minister no longer exists.

Whatever happens in Brussels, it is time now for the Council of Ministers to take firm action. As the Lords remark, the ultimate responsibility for better organisation rests with ministers, and they had best wade into this problem with some vigour. □