European research

SERC struggles to pay

BRITISH research councils may next year be spared some of the financial difficulties arising from the recent fall in the value of sterling and the consequent increased cost of subscriptions to international organizations. A committee set up by the Treasury is understood to have recommended some alleviation of the financial embarrassment likely particularly to afflict the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) in the financial year 1984-85, beginning next April.

The final outcome will not, however, be known until next month, when the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) will be making its annual recommendation on the distribution of the UK science budget between the five research councils and smaller organizations such as the Royal Society. Meanwhile, within SERC itself, a manpower review panel has been set up, stimulated partly by cash shortages but also by the Rayner review of

its operations, to decide whether the number of SERC research institutes should be reduced.

The fall in the value of sterling and the rise in the UK gross domestic product relative to that of other member states mean that international subscriptions to the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and the European Space Agency (ESA) will cost SERC an extra £10 million or so. The problem became acute earlier this year (see *Nature* 303, 742; 1983) when the council's research boards were required to consider several drastic options. Meanwhile, a committee under the chairmanship of Miss J. Kelley was set up to consider whether there might be scope for relaxing the rigid accounting rules applied by the Treasury to public spending and which, for example, do not allow surplus credit to be carried over from one year to another.

In the past, SERC has sometimes found itself embarrassingly flush with funds towards the end of a financial year and has encouraged hasty applications from the universities to ensure that no surplus is left. But this year the currency situation has left the council with a cash shortage which has resulted in various drastic measures such as a temporary halt on grant payments by the Astronomy, Space and Radio (ASR) Board.

The Kelley committee has now reported to its ministers, although its advice and even its membership is classified as secret. The Treasury is, however, believed to have conceded ground to the case for extra flexibility. Although action has still to be decided, it seems that a bid by ABRC earlier this year for supplementary funds for SERC has fallen on fertile ground.

Nevertheless, SERC is unlikely to find that all its problems melt away. The Nuclear Physics Board, whose particle physics research depends on the council's subscription to CERN, is already under pressure because of the size of this contribution. Despite CERN's leadership in the accelerator league, the *per capita* cost of high-energy physics remains high and the side-benefits small or at least disputed. But the international nature of the project, current excitement about new particles and the apparent personal interest of the Prime Minister make CERN a tough target for cost-cutters.

The Science Board (responsible for such fields as chemistry, solid-state physics and some aspects of biology) has also been undergoing an internal review. By highlighting areas of research requiring encouragement, it is becoming more directive than reactive. One consequence may be that important projects are protected even if SERC follows precedent in distributing budgetary shortages equally across all research boards.

Philip Campbell

French research policy

Fabius looks to Europe

Paris

CAN socialist France influence conservative Britain and West Germany to cooperate on science and the new technologies? Only time will tell, but the next few months will certainly see an intense French diplomatic effort to create what Laurent Fabius, French minister of state for industry and research, calls a "European space" for science and technology. One sign of this was the bullish memorandum submitted to the European council of ministers earlier this month (see *Nature* 6 October, p.462), to be discussed at the summit in Athens in December.

Fabius outlined his views on the French position on science and technology earlier this month. Science and technology, he says, have to be seen in relationship to industry; and while the individual nations of Europe have made "great efforts" in each of these areas, "none is big enough", and there is duplication and waste of effort. France seeks two things in research and industry in Europe: better coordination and common projects. These are separate ideas, Fabius emphasized. "If the nations continue to act apart, they risk being overtaken technologically and scientifically", he said.

But is not France rather alone among the bigger European countries in its commitment to research and in its devotion to central planning? Can French strategies really take root in the rest of Europe? Fabius thinks they can. "I don't know if the differences are so great", he said. "Ideology is one thing; when you have power you have to face facts", said Fabius, breaking into English. "Above all, there are financial constraints and, then, we don't have any central planning at all. We think it is good to have a sort of strategic approach — to define a few priorities (not too many) and to associate everyone in the effecting of these priorities: industry, laboratories, public and private finance. . . . Yes, we are making a big financial effort, because we think that research is the key to the future: a modern economy needs flexibility and research gives us that. Research is fundamentally what separates a strategy of hope from one of resignation."

But "when I talk to my opposite numbers in Germany, the United Kingdom and others, political colour doesn't enter at all". Other countries in Europe, said Fabius, "have the same concern [for research] but it is more difficult for them to have a very activist attitude — that's the difference". Fabius, who visited Britain a few weeks ago for discussions at the Departments of Trade and Industry and Education and Science, considers that "there is a big effort (though certainly in

Observatory at risk

THE Astronomy, Space and Radio (ASR) Board, faced with the possible need to find another £1 million for international subscriptions out of its £40 million budget for 1984-85, has set up a manpower advisory panel to examine the staffing and roles of three SERC institutes, the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO) and the Royal Observatory Edinburgh. Under the chairmanship of Professor A. P. Willmore, an X-ray astronomer at the University of Birmingham, the committee will in particular consider whether all three institutes are necessary.

On the surface, RGO seems to be the most vulnerable because it is in a process of transition towards becoming a centre for the remote use and control of new telescopes (currently being developed at La Palma in the Canary Islands) via satellite links. Moreover, a recent review by the government's efficiency body (the Rayner unit) has recommended the sale of Herstmonceux Castle — a substantial part of RGO's facilities (see *Nature* 304, 3; 1983). However, recently developed detectors are enabling British ground-based astronomers (including those at the two royal observatories) to maintain research programmes that are internationally competitive and it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the manpower panel, which will report next January, will opt for change. An old chestnut of an argument (some might call it a conker) underlying its discussions relates to the proper balance between research carried out in universities and that carried out in SERC institutions.

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