

Eureka

France optimistic on meetings

BRITAIN and France are coming closer together on issues of European science and technology policy, to judge by the impressions of M. Hubert Curien, the French Science Minister, of his flying visit to Britain last week.

"I was glad to see we all agree very closely on Eureka" said Curien, after an afternoon with Sir Keith Joseph, British Secretary of State for Education and Science, and Mr Geoffrey Pattie, Minister for Information Technology. Eureka, the French project to develop a series of new high-technology European products from supercomputers to genetically engineered seeds (see *Nature* 11 July p.97), is the subject of a 17-delegation European conference in Paris this week, and Curien was certainly interested during his British visit to test Britain's opinion after British isolation on issues of wider European integration at the recent summit in Milan. He left London "much more optimistic", and undismayed by reports that the British government is interested in Eureka only if it costs no new money. Anyhow, Eureka could start with only very meagre cash support, Curien intimated, but would not commit himself to precise figures for fear of prejudicing this week's meeting.

Out of the Paris meeting, Curien is seeking three things. First, an agreement on the principles of Eureka (that should be "no problem"); second, to produce a dossier of the interests of each country in the various "broad fields" of Eureka; and third and most difficult, to define a structure in which Eureka should be managed.

Curien was adamant last week that Eureka should not fall into the embrace of the European Commission. He would like to see a "very light" structure, although he said at a lunchtime meeting at the London-based Policy Studies Institute (PSI) that to avoid bureaucracy altogether could prove "idealistic". The European Commission could not manage Eureka because it had never produced products, and Eureka was strictly product-oriented, he said. The Commission's ESPRIT programme on stimulating cooperation among European companies in pre-competitive research in information technology is a success, but it stops at pre-competitive research — precisely because it is difficult at the Commission to reach unanimous agreement in the European Council (the Commission's political master) on real and potentially competitive products.

Curien is a past president of the French space agency CNES which designed, built and tested Ariane, Europe's space launcher, and naturally he sees the success of Ariane as a model for Eureka. The European Space Agency, which commissioned Ariane, had adopted in 1973 a policy of projects "à la carte". Ariane went ahead only because the French wanted it pas-

sionately: they paid two-thirds of the development cost, while Britain stood aside. "If it had been a mandatory programme we would have had no Ariane." Equally, Germany (with Italy) had shouldered most of the burden of developing Spacelab, and Britain had put 50 per cent support into the European Communications Satellite, ECS.

Such projects could not have taken place within the Commission structure, Curien felt, because of the present requirement for unanimity in the Council of Ministers. "The result is always support for the least offensive programme", Curien said, and it is "difficult to be ambitious" within the European Communities structure. (Ironically, the often ambitious Commission officials would certainly agree, faced as they often are by the immovable political obstacle of the Council of Ministers.)

Curien sees the future Eureka management as an "industrial" structure, focused on making things, which should be selected on technical merit and not political representation, Curien insists. And he

agreed with Sir Hermann Bondi, chairman of the PSI meeting, that Eureka will need a technical group "of a quality respected by industry". But "I don't want 17 representatives on everything", one from each state, says Curien.

Asked how Eureka projects would be chosen, Curien emphasized the need for specific, practical projects: "if we just say 'robotics' that would be useless"; but he was less insistent on the need to identify a market for each product. He seemed to be thinking largely along the lines of other major French government-led successes such as the high-speed train and nuclear power, and thus of government purchasers. He admitted, however, that both government and the free market must be considered.

Curien did not expect the Paris political meeting this week to define specific projects — that would be for working groups involving industry later on, once the political ground rules had been settled. However, he did hope to see "five or six" projects under way by the end of this year.

Robert Walgate

The 17 delegations should consist of the 12 European Community countries, plus Norway, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland and a delegation from the European Commission.

US ASAT

Live test tactfully postponed

Washington

A PLANNED July test of the US antisatellite (ASAT) weapon against a live target in space has been delayed yet again, and is unlikely to be rescheduled before Congress renews a moratorium on such tests. The previous moratorium expired in March.

The official explanation for the delay is a technical problem with the instrumented target, designed to simulate the infrared radiation of a Soviet satellite and to monitor the ASAT's performance. The targets have been returned to their manufacturer, Avco Systems, for repairs.

According to congressional staff, however, problems with ASAT itself persist as well. Last December, the Air Force was seeking bids on a contract for the redesign of ASAT's manoeuvring propulsion package, an array of 57 miniature solid-fuel rockets that steers the 12-inch-long, non-explosive projectile into its target. One problem mentioned then was motor exhaust contaminating the infrared sensors that lock onto heat radiation from the target. The failure to resolve these problems is thought to have led the Air Force to delay the test scheduled for July; the ASAT has been returned to its manufacturers, LTV Corporation.

Under current law, the test against a target could proceed if the President certifies to Congress that the test is necessary to avert irrevocable damage to

national security, that it would not damage prospects for negotiating a treaty limiting ASATs, and that the administration is trying to negotiate such a treaty.

The House of Representatives last month passed an amendment to the 1986 defence bill that allows tests only if the Soviet Union tests first a dedicated ASAT system against a target in space. The Senate has adopted a weaker amendment, requiring only presidential certification of his efforts to negotiate a treaty. The US ASAT has so far been fired only at an imaginary target in space.

One suspicion all along has been that the delay in testing against a target, although originally the result of technical problems, has been dragged out for diplomatic reasons.

US officials made it known last week that Soviet negotiators in Geneva have informally proposed dropping their insistence on an end to Star Wars research as a precondition for any new arms-control agreement.

The Soviets are said to be willing to draw a distinction between laboratory research, which could continue, and development and field testing, which would be banned. The Soviet delegates were said to have singled out the US ASAT tests as one example of actions that would not be allowed. The Soviets are expected to submit this new position in a formal proposal shortly.

Stephen Budiansky