British astronomy

Observatory move stirs passions

THE plan to move the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO) from its present location in Sussex to somewhere else in Britain has evoked mixed passions among British astronomers. If possible, feelings run even more strongly than in the high-energy physics community when British membership of the European Organisation for Nuclear Physics (CERN) was being examined more than a year ago. But British astronomers are divided between those who think RGO should stay where it is and those who wish it to be moved to one

quired by SERC, they were told that the requirement of floor space had doubled.

According to a SERC spokesman this week, there is some confusion on this point. He acknowledged that there had been a change of specification, but said that the present requirement for 4,000 m² of space was intended to be a gross figure; usable floor space would be three-quarters of the total. This does not fully meet the Oxford contention that the hospitality the university offers includes a large workshop equipped for work in

burgh observatory and the university and by saying that the continued separate existence of RGO and the Edinburgh observatory offers the best scientific value. He then goes on, after declaring his interest, to put the case for Manchester on the grounds of geography and facilities.

Astronomers elsewhere appear mostly to wish that a decision could be avoided. All speak highly of the work done by the two public observatories in commissioning new telescopes on Hawaii (ROE) and La Palma (RGO); there is particularly high praise for the support offered by RGO to academic astronomers using the 2.5-m Isaac Newton telescope at La Palma.

This argument is lent support by the lack so far of an estimate of the savings that may result from the proposed move, which SERC says is being made on scientific grounds within the constraint that the cost of the move should be supported by the sale of assets. The staff at RGO has already shrunk from its peak of about 240 to a present complement of 190. By the time planned for the move in 1990, it is intended that the observatory's staff should consist of about 100 people in Britain with a further 30 at La Palma.

The opinions of the RGO staff are also divided, but favour Cambridge. A survey carried out last month (to which 55 per cent of the staff responded) showed that 80 per cent would be prepared to move somewhere, of whom 90 per cent gave Cambridge as their preference. Asked to identify the sites to which they would not move, only two per cent of the staff came out against Cambridge. In response to the same question, 60 per cent said they would not move to Edinburgh and 50 per cent dug in their heels against Manchester.

Meanwhile, a regional political lobby is forming to preserve RGO at its present site. The East Sussex County Council and the North Weald District Council, both of which have an interest in the tourists attracted by Herstmonceux, are seeking to influence official opinion, as are local members of parliament.

There is no precedent for political forces such as these influencing the autonomous decisions of research councils, yet SERC will need strong nerves if it is to stick to its timetable of a decision next month. Matters have not been much simplified by reports that Dr Harry Atkinson, the senior official of SERC in charge of astronomy spending (and also chairman of the European Space Research Organisation) had given the members of one committee the impression that there were political considerations in the decision not to vacate the Edinburgh site. Dr Atkinson explained on the telephone this week that he meant only that, in his opinion, SERC should pay attention to the regional distribution of its establishments, but even that may be enough for the Sussex lobby to keep the door ajar.

John Maddox

or other of the three candidate locations.

The decision that RGO should be moved was taken by the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) in March (see *Nature*, 320, 297, 1986). SERC is to decide at its meeting in June whether RGO should, while retaining its identity, go the Universities of Cambridge or Manchester or, alternatively, unite with the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh (ROE), on its Blackford Hill site.

SERC's announcement of these developments followed an invitation to seven British universities to offer hospitality to a transplanted RGO. Dr E.J.W. Mitchell, SERC's chairman, explained in March that the decision to move RGO had arisen in part from disappointment with the strength of its present relationship with university astronomers. Of the three future locations for RGO, the council said that Edinburgh was the most favoured.

Some of the fiercest reactions to this development have come from universities not now on the short-list of candidate locations. The University of Oxford, one of those invited to provide a site for RGO earlier in the year, is up in arms at what local astronomers consider to have been a change in the rules of SERC's competition when the winning post was in sight. In a strongly worded protest to SERC, Oxford astronomers have complained that, when they had identified a building capable of providing the 2,000 m² of floor space re-

nuclear physics which will be under-used when SERC ceases to support the tandem electrostatic generator on the site.

The lobbying of the two universities on the short-list is, for Britain, unusually direct. The University of Manchester makes a great deal of its offer of rent-free accommodation, on the site of the Christie Hospital, for RGO. At Cambridge, on the other hand, it seems to be accepted that SERC would have to meet the cost of a building to house RGO, presumably out of the proceeds of the sale of the Herstmonceux buildings: SERC has said that the move will have to be self-financing. In the nature of things, the sale of the castle is at the speculative end of the real-estate spectrum.

Intellectually, Cambridge offers propinquity to the Institute of Astronomy and the Cavendish Laboratory, with RGO to be sited in the grounds of the university observatory adjoining the institute. Manchester, by contrast, emphasizes its own close academic links with other universities and polytechnics in the Midlands and northern England. In a letter addressed to all fellows of the Royal Astronomical Society, the Astronomer-Royal, Sir Francis Graham Smith, who is also director of the Jodrell Bank Observatory of the University of Manchester, argues first against the preferred move to Edinburgh on the grounds of geography, the tenuous academic link between the Edin-