Police question UK science minister in loan inquiry

British science minister David Sainsbury has been questioned by police investigating links between loans to the governing Labour party and appointments to the House of Lords, it was revealed last week.

Sainsbury, who has donated £6.5 million (US$11.8 million) to the Labour party since 2002, is the latest politician to be caught up in the 'cash for peerages' row. Officials confirmed on 13 July that the minister had spoken to detectives, although he was not cautioned or arrested.

Sainsbury, who has been in office since 1998 and is widely regarded as having performed well as minister, is a billionaire, thanks to his family's supermarket business. In April he apologized after failing to declare a £2-million loan to his party. The minister said he had confused the loan with a donation of the same amount.

For more on Sainsbury, see www.nature.com/news/sainsbury

T. MONASSE/AFP/GETTY

Loan arranger: David Sainsbury failed to declare a £2-million loan to the Labour party.

Reporting of biodefence risks comes under scrutiny

A US government advisory panel has backed away from recommending that scientists receiving public funds be required to complete a checklist to gauge the biodefence risk posed by their research (see *Nature* 440, 715; 2006).

The US National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, which met on 13 July, said it was acting on the basis of feedback from researchers. "Scientists already feel that they're over-regulated," says Dennis Kasper, the board's chair and an expert in bacterial infections at Harvard Medical School in Boston.

The board instead approved a voluntary guide for assessing the risks of communicating sensitive biodefence research. It also released two other draft reports: a code of ethics, and criteria for identifying civilian research that could have implications for bioterrorism. The reports will be open for public comment after recommendations on research oversight and increasing scientists' awareness of such dual-use work are added in the coming months.

Smashing mission reveals what makes up a comet

When NASA's Deep Impact probe smashed into the comet Tempel 1 last July, spilling its innards, astronomers had their telescopes ready. Some of the results, published online last week (C. M. Lisse *et al. Science* doi:10.1126/science.1124694; 2006), reveal that comets are a complex mix of components.

Emission spectra captured by the Spitzer Space Telescope contain evidence for at least 16 different substances, including silicates, water ice and gas, and sulphides, providing insight into the formation of comets. The crystalline silicates, for example, are thought to have formed at high temperatures close to the Sun, and so must somehow have been transported to more distant parts of the Solar System, where Tempel 1 was formed.

NASA/JPL-CALTECH/UMD

Malaria in Africa set to get the SETI treatment

Even those lacking the billions of Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, whose philanthropy is funding efforts to tackle diseases of the developing world, can contribute to research into one of the worst killers: malaria.

Africa@home, launched on 13 July, allows volunteers to donate computing time to modelling malaria's dynamics. To participate, volunteers download a program from www.africaathome.net that simulates the transmission and health effects of the malaria parasite across Africa. The model, developed by scientists at the Swiss Tropical Institute in Basel, then runs in the background on the user's computer.

Africa@home was set up by a collaboration of academic institutions and non-governmental organizations. It is the latest in a series of scientific distributed-computing initiatives inspired by the search for alien signals, SETI@home. Other similar projects allow volunteers to simulate climate, for example, or analyse data from gravitational-wave detectors.

Plant study casts doubt on scale of methane emission

A recent surprising discovery — that plants may release large amounts of the greenhouse gas methane (*Nature* 439, 187–191; 2006) — may be much less significant on a global scale than initial lab experiments suggested, Australian scientists say.

They claim that the original researchers made an error when scaling up lab data to global vegetation cover. Because roots and woody material are unlikely to release significant amounts of methane, only the leaf mass of trees, shrubs and grasses should have been used when calculating global methane fluxes, they argue (M. U. F. Kirschbaum *et al. Funct. Plant Biol.* 33, 521–530; 2006). They calculate that plants release between 10 million and 60 million tonnes of methane per year, substantially less than the 60 million to 240 million tonnes initially estimated.

The mechanism by which plants emit methane is still unknown, and different attempts to verify the initial findings have led to different results.

Experimental drug fails to stop prion disease

An experimental treatment for prion disease, which was at the centre of legal action between patients' families and doctors, does not seem to work, British researchers say.

In 2001, preliminary lab results suggested that pentosan polysulphate slowed the development of prion disease in mice. Families of people suffering from variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease went to court for access to the experimental drug (see *Nature* 426, 487; 2003). But after tracking the progress of seven patients given the drug, advisers to the Medical Research Council declared on 12 July that it does not seem to slow the brain degeneration caused by the disease.

The team did note that the patients, some of whom had been ill for several years, survived for "unusually long periods". The disease, thought to have killed 156 people in Britain since 1995, usually kills victims within a year of symptoms developing.

Correction

The News in Brief story 'Historic observatory to be preserved in luxury complex' (*Nature* **441,** 800; 2006) should have said that although Edwin Hubble published observations made at Yerkes Observatory, and Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar was affiliated with the observatory, neither of them is known to have used its 40-inch telescope.