

Science needs women (cont.)

Campaigns on behalf of women researchers are achieving a higher political profile. Recent European initiatives are welcome, but lobbying leadership is needed for them to be followed through amidst political change.

In recent years the issue of the small number of women working in science has shifted from being seen as one of social justice to one of economic sense — that in societies increasingly demanding a skilled technical workforce we need to stop squandering half of our scientific potential. So the drawing together by the European Commission last week (see page 202) of a so-called ‘network of networks’ of women-in-science groups to form an assemblage large enough, and with enough tentacles, to apply pressure in many of the right places around Europe was a timely idea.

In some places, the women-in-science lobby is already showing the effectiveness of carefully coordinated campaigns; witness, for example, its impact during the recent World Conference on Science, in Budapest. In the United States, the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) has achieved the creation of a Congress-mandated Commission on Women and Minorities in Science and Technology; AWIS’s eight-year campaign has produced a body that will seek to collect examples of effective strategies for recruiting, retaining and advancing women in science.

Last week’s Declaration of Networks Active in Europe sets out ambitious recommendations, its pan-European agenda having its sights firmly set on the political process, arguing for the need for strategic action, lobbying and advocacy. Nevertheless, a notable absence at the commission’s meeting was any emergence of a Europe-based leadership from among the networks. Catherine Jay Didion, the executive director of AWIS, keynote speaker at the meeting and one of those behind the US commission, exemplifies the type of fig-

ure that is urgently required at a European level. Such people are needed to win friends and backers within the science community and to lobby at a political level. A strong figurehead can also gain broader support from the public. The emergence of strong leaders within the women-in-science lobby in the United States and United Kingdom has led to enhanced political clout in those countries.

It is unclear how the issue of women in science will fare in the medium term inside the European Commission. The topic is currently one of considerable activity, following its jump-start last year by the then research commissioner, Edith Cresson. But little is known of the priorities of the proposed new commissioner, physicist Philippe Busquin (see page 203). Given the current momentum behind efforts by the commission on the issue of women in science, this would be an appropriate topic to be pursued by the European Parliament at its hearings on his candidacy later this year.

The recognition of the network of networks is an important step forward for both European science and women scientists. Science needs the best scientists, and that can only be attained by realizing the full potential of women. But although the commission’s first priority might be to use the network to raise the numbers of women in expert advisory panels in the fifth Framework programme of research, it knows that only a small fraction of research spending comes through this route. If the commission is intent on encouraging women in science, it should also seek to stimulate new standards in the national programmes of EU member states. □

Fighting the China syndrome

The next head of the US nuclear weapons laboratories must repair the damage done by the recent spy scandal.

The entire Chinese spy débâcle which has engulfed the United States this year rests largely on a piece of paper detailing aspects of a US nuclear warhead design purportedly stolen by China, which was delivered one day to an American embassy by a ‘walk-in’ source who later turned out to be working for Chinese intelligence.

No one knows why China fed this highly sensitive material back to the United States in this way. Officials at the Los Alamos nuclear weapons laboratory have mischievously suggested that the real intent was to wreak havoc in the United States. They point out, only half in jest, that just such a tactic — the delivery of accurate intelligence to an enemy, followed by the revelation that the source of the intelligence was in fact a double agent — was identified by Chinese military historians in AD 600 as a nifty means of sowing confusion in the enemy camp.

Whatever China was really up to, each twist and turn of the spying scandal — every piece of nonsense spoken about lax security at the laboratories and every clueless intervention from Washington politicians — has added a little credence to the still-implausible theory that the United States is falling victim to a fiendishly clever Chinese plot. In truth, it is difficult to imagine that any enemy action could have deliberately paralysed the US nuclear weapons complex as effectively as this domestically driven scandal has done.

The three weapons laboratories have been in turmoil for most of

the year. Experienced laboratory staff, who have lived and breathed national security for much of their working lives, have been instructed to ‘stand down’ for days at a time, like errant schoolchildren, to listen to politicians’ speeches or read security memoranda. The laboratories’ extensive international connections have been thrown into chaos. Polygraph machines — a kind of embodiment of anti-science, feared by conscientious employees and scoffed at by professional spies such as Aldrich Ames, who passed dozens of polygraph tests — are arriving to keep tabs on some 5,000 laboratory employees.

A Senate proposal in response to the scandal, agreed to last week by Bill Richardson, the energy secretary, would place the weapons laboratories under a semi-autonomous agency within the energy department. But Vic Reis, who formerly ran the weapons laboratories as assistant energy secretary for defence programmes, already enjoyed considerable autonomy within the department. Richardson’s decision to fire Reis — a widely respected research administrator with a strong technical background and good political connections — indicates that scapegoating has gained the upper hand over common sense. The energy secretary says that, if a new agency is established, its chief must have a ‘national security background’. He or she had better also have the leadership skills and technical credentials to win back the confidence of the laboratories’ tormented employees. □