

Experts review European Collaboration

from our Paris Correspondent

THE agitation caused by Mr Soames's "revelations" and the uncertain effect of the talks with President Nixon—even the French rugby team's defeat by England—add a new dimension to the task of assessing the chances of European technological cooperation. Although present circumstances give little encouragement to the militant fervour of Mr Christopher Layton's readers (see *Nature*, 221, 697; 1969), there is reason to believe that the work of the "Aigrain group", which should be submitting its report to the member states of the EEC on March 15, is not only of academic interest. This, at least, is the conviction of some European political figures, including Mr Théo Lefèvre, the Belgian Minister of Technology.

The whole business got off to an inauspicious start. On October 31, 1967, in Luxembourg, the Ministers for Science of the Six authorized a group of experts to put forward recommendations for methods of co-operation in seven specific areas; metallurgy, transportation, pollution, telecommunications, data processing, meteorology and oceanography. (Originally the working party was called the "Maréchal group" after its chairman. Mr Maréchal was at that time the General Delegate for scientific and technical research in France. Later he was replaced in both jobs by Professor Pierre Aigrain.) In 1968, however, the Maréchal group lapsed into inactivity after the Netherlands and Italy had refused to take part in its study as a protest against the French veto of British candidacy. It was not until September 19, 1968, that the Six finally agreed to get the group working again and then asked for a report to be submitted on March 15, 1969. This report will then be studied by the member countries and discussed in forum during July.

The complete and authorized text is not known as this article is being written. In several areas, nevertheless, concrete proposals seem definitively to have been made. The most ambitious project concerns computers. As regards hardware, it would involve developing in cooperation, between now and 1975, a very powerful machine comparable with the largest American systems, and starting work around 1980 on another computer which would be revolutionary in concept. On the other hand, the report says, the creation of a European data transmission network and a central program library, as well as the standardization of program languages, should all give considerable impetus to European data processing. To realize these plans, there is a scheme for an initial programme lasting at least five years and costing about \$50 million.

In metallurgy, the experts consider that Europe's position is sound, at least where conventional metals and alloys are concerned. But this is not true for refined metals, an area of metallurgy where rapid progress is vital to certain user industries such as industrial chemicals, industrial electronics, gas turbine construction and the production of seawater desalination plants. Here also the Aigrain group has come down in favour of the idea of a huge programme spread over

several years. The German delegation seemed particularly anxious for a major concerted effort, taking in almost every branch of metallurgy.

It must not be forgotten, of course, that the specialists who make up the seven sub-groups are called on only to give technical advice and that the decisions taken in Brussels (to say nothing of their subsequent application) will turn most firmly on political considerations. It is said, moreover, that even within the national delegations themselves there have been certain apparent disagreements—over the desalination of seawater, for example. Yet it is hard to believe that, on important matters at least, the experts behaved purely as private individuals and did not bear in mind, if not the firm instructions, at least the more or less explicit wishes of their governments. Without becoming too optimistic, therefore, one can treat the opinion expressed by the French representative of the Aigrain group as decidedly worthy of attention. This suggested that, as regards data processing, collaboration with Britain would be very useful. Admittedly this idea was mooted before the "affaire Soames". . . .

In the coming months other incidents could crop up and increase or lessen the chance of the EEC adopting the recommendations to be presented to it on March 15. Implementing the final decisions will moreover be a complex business (the unfortunate experience of Euratom proves this) so long as there are no proper solutions to such serious problems as patent rights—the demands of firms participating in a European programme are difficult to reconcile with the collective nature of the EEC's proposed projects—as well as the problem of a "fair return". If these obstacles are not eliminated, the countries involved, regrettably, might well pursue their usual policies; projects which show the most promise will be developed separately on a national level or at best in the framework of a bilateral agreement, and joint enterprises will be used only for supplementary programmes.

So far the time allowed for the work has been very short. The opinion in Brussels is that although certain proposals are already quite concrete, others are still fairly vague. The data-processing sub-group appears to have covered the most ground so far (it called for talks in Brussels with representatives of several large industrial firms in order to study with them different working arrangements). This perhaps explains why Mr Théo Lefèvre said in the Belgian House of Deputies that in the computer sector at least the European programmes could be drawn up this summer, whereas in other areas decisions will probably be taken rather later. But will Mr Lefèvre have the support of his colleagues? Experience leads one to fear that agreement is no longer easily reached, even on vague proposals—indeed, malicious observers claim that this is especially true when proposals are vague, and tend to refer to areas such as pollution, meteorology or "basic" oceanography, where competition in industry is rather less tense.