

applications from 60,000 to 155,000 or 20,000. He added, however, that the reported date of achieving the European patent was highly optimistic and that 1976 would be more realistic. The decrease in the number of applications to the British office would be reflected by a decrease in staff but it would not lead to redundancy as the European office would need qualified people. The site of the European office has not been decided although Mr Fergusson said that it must be within an EEC country.

The advantages of a European patents office are that it will avoid duplication of applications and work. Ideally, national patent offices should cease to exist when the European office is working, but Mr Fergusson said that it was not planned to close the British office and that a substantial number of applications would still be received as the cost of obtaining a European patent would be high. Most of the overseas applications, now about 60 per cent of the total, would go to the European office but a trickle of applications from the United States would still be received. The British Patent Office is planning to carry out a market research survey in 1972 to see how many of the British applications will be channelled through the European office.

The standards to be set by the European office are more stringent than those now in force in Britain and most European countries and comparable to those of West Germany. Agreement has already been reached by the nineteen countries presently negotiating that if the European office finds a patent invalid then it will also be declared invalid in the member countries. If an application is made simultaneously to the British and European offices, Mr Fergusson said that the British application would be suppressed until the result of the European patent is known.

The logical step to take after setting up a European office would be to obtain world-wide standardization of patents. Mr Fergusson said that this was not feasible because of the different concepts—now standardized in Europe—of the essential ingredients of a patentable idea. It seems, however, that this would be a laudable aim and the Patent Cooperation Treaty set up last year (see *Nature*, 226, 888; 1971) goes a long way towards achieving it. This treaty eases the work on patent offices by sharing the exploratory work, but applications have still to be made to individual countries to register patents.

COMPUTERS

Profit the ERA Way

WITH declining sales and profits rapidly turning into losses in the computer service industry, it is surprising to find

the Electrical Research Association launching a new company, Electra Computer Services. But this is a logical development of ERA's activity in the computer field over the past two years, and points the way for future profitable developments in the industry. The organization of the ERA is more like that of comparable American research institutions than of British research associations—more than 90 per cent of its activities are carried out under contract without the aid of government funds. There is no government support for the computer unit, which was established two years ago, chiefly for the benefit of members of the ERA.

Why has the ERA been successful when other computer service companies are falling by the wayside every week? The association says that it provides a personal service. The managing director of the new company is Mr Paul Addison who has headed the Association's computer activities since they started. He emphasized that customers are not really concerned with how a computer bureau solves their problems but only the accuracy of the solution. Whereas most bureaux fall into one of two categories—providing solutions to scientific

and technical problems by the flexible use of their hardware, or selling off the peg packages to solve standard problems such as payroll calculations—the bureaux of the future must provide a complete data processing service to be credible. It is the aim of the ERA to provide such a service with Electra, solving unique problems or providing standard services as required, so that the customer has the same sort of close contact and versatility which he could expect from his own in-house computer.

The association claims that its customers have been persuaded by experience that it is often better to buy computer time rather than a machine. In one case, for example, it says that a customer was able to reduce his annual expenditure from £70,000 to £15,000 by forsaking his machine for the association's service. The association also claims its reputation with industry now allows it to give potential clients a feeling that the provision of computer services is not another way of robbing them of cash. For customers new to the use of electronic computers the ERA says that its services are a useful intermediate step to the purchase of a machine.

Appointments

MRS MARGARET THATCHER, Secretary of State for Education and Science, announced last week the appointment of new members to the Natural Environment Research Council, Medical Research Council, Computer Board for Universities and Research Councils and the Advisory Committee for Scientific and Technical Information.

Four new members are appointed to NERC: Professor P. Allen, University of Reading, Professor R. B. Clark, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Professor K. M. Clayton, University of East Anglia, and Dr H. C. Pereira, East Mall Research Station. From October 1, 1971, NERC will be composed of the new members together with Professor F. H. Stewart as chairman, Professor Sir Edward Bullard, Professor R. W. Edwards, Lord Howick of Glendale, Rear Admiral Sir Edmund Irving, Dr C. E. Lucas, Mr T. A. L. Paton, Professor F. W. Shotton and Sir Owen Wansbrough-Jones.

The Medical Research Council also has four new members: Professor D. A. K. Black, University of Manchester and Manchester Royal Infirmary, J. P. Bull, MRC Industrial Injuries and Burns Unit, Birmingham Accident Hospital, D. G. Davey, Imperial Chemical Industries, and Professor R. B. Welbourn, University of London, Royal Postgraduate Medical School and Hammersmith Hospital. The non-retiring members of the council are: His Grace the Duke of Northumberland (chairman), Professor Sir Richard Doll, L. Pavitt, Professor W. S. Peart, Professor D. A. Pond, Professor R. R. Porter, Professor T. Symington, Professor P. M. B. Walker, Professor R. E. O. Williams and Dr J. A. B. Gray.

The Advisory Committee for Scientific and Technical Information is increased to twelve members by the appointment of Professor G. Black, University of Manchester, Professor L. Maunder, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and Dr R. Weck of the Welding Institute to the committee. The other members are: Dr L. Rotherham, chairman, Dr J. W. Barrett, Mr J. G. N. Brown, Dr G. M. Dyson, Mr H. J. Habakkuk, Professor J. B. Jepson, Mr N. Mackenzie, Mr D. T. Richnell and Professor G. D. Sims.

Professor G. A. Barnard, University of Essex, and Professor J. C. Gunn, University of Glasgow, are appointed to the Computer Board for Universities and Research Councils. The other members of the board are: Professor D. J. Finney, chairman, Mr A. H. Duncan, Dr J. Howlett, Dr K. W. Morton, Professor D. J. Newell and Professor M. H. Rogers.