

OLD WORLD

EUROPEAN LABORATORY

Italians Show Willing

THE working party set up by the Italian delegation to Esro to make recommendations on the future of the European Space Research Institute (Esrin) has produced a comprehensive plan which will be debated in Paris at an Esro council meeting within the next fortnight. The plan, which is a viable alternative to closing the laboratory, has the added advantage over its predecessor (see *Nature*, 234, 3; 1971) of having the support of the scientists at Esrin.

The first Italian plan involved splitting the laboratory into an Italian part and a part that would remain under the auspices of Esro, but it is now suggested that there should be cooperation between Esro and the Italian government without a physical division.

According to the new scheme, Italian scientists would be recruited to Esrin but would not exceed 50 per cent of those already employed. The result would be to concentrate Italian research in plasma and space physics and, indeed, under this scheme now put forward, the contribution of the Italian government — through the Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR)—would come from money saved in the rationalization of their research.

Under this plan, the budget of the reconstituted laboratory would be \$2.7 million of which CNR would contribute \$1.7 million and Esro the remainder. The property, under this plan, would still be owned by Esro.

Scientists at Esrin seem to be pleased with the plan but, even so, it is clear that the Italian proposal does not meet the original objections to the laboratory—that it carried out research which is incompatible with the present aims of Esro. Financially, the laboratory has been a modest burden—the total Esro scientific budget is \$63 million in 1971, but Esrin costs only \$2 million a year. Thus the argument that Esrin can still be maintained at a reduced cost to Esro of \$1 million does not remove the fundamental objection to the laboratory.

COMPUTER SOCIETY

Expanding into the Red

THE British Computer Society is planning to raise its membership subscriptions (which range at present from £3 for a student to £12 for a fellow) by a "substantial amount" according to Professor A. S. Douglas of the London School of Economics, who was elected president of the society at its recent annual general meeting. The reasons

for this are clear from the annual report published in the September issue of *The Computer Bulletin*; the society showed a deficit of £4,608 for the financial year 1970–71 compared with a surplus of £8,950 the previous year. Fortunately the reserve fund stands at about £50,000.

Although the society says that inflation has contributed to the reversal of fortune, it also emphasizes the expansion which has taken place during the past year, including, for example, the equipping and staffing of a print room for the production of the society's ever-increasing output of literature on conferences and computer education. The income from conferences and symposia was only about £2,000 during 1970–71 compared with about £6,000 the year before and this reduction seems to have been due chiefly to a change in the pattern of attendance at the society's marathon Datafair conference—more delegates attended than in 1970 but for shorter periods.

Although membership of the society has increased by more than 10 per cent to about 17,000 since a concerted recruitment campaign was started in May this year, Professor Douglas says that the rate of increase was not as great as had been hoped. About 50 new members a week are now being recruited and the society is aiming for a membership of about 30,000 within two or three years (see *Nature*, 231, 74; 1971).

University Grants Committee

MRS MARGARET THATCHER, Minister of Education and Science, announced in the House of Commons last week that she was increasing the universities recurrent grant for the 1971–72 academic year from £225 million to £238.1 million. The increase, according to Mrs Thatcher, is to take into account price increases during the past twelve months but Mr Norman Buchan, member for West Renfrew, disputed this as he thought a 6 per cent increase was insufficient to meet the effects of inflation. Mrs Thatcher also added that the provisional grant for the 1972–73 academic year would be £248.5 million, a sum that includes £1.7 million for running the computers which the UGC will take over from the Computer Board for Universities and the research councils. As well as this increased sum for university spending next year Mrs Thatcher announced that she was allocating an extra £23.25 million for equipment.

SPACE

Onward and Upward

A RECOMMENDATION that will be welcomed by the space science community in Britain is that an independent space agency be set up to be responsible to the Minister for Aerospace for all Britain's civil interests in space. This recommendation, made by the Select Committee on Science and Technology in their report published yesterday, will rationalize Britain's space effort which is now divided among several different departments (*United Kingdom Space Activities*, HMSO, £3.15).

The report is the result of a twelve-month effort by the committee that took evidence from people involved in space work in Britain together with evidence from the director-general of Esro and the secretary-general of Eldo. During the time that the committee sat Britain's space programme received setbacks with the scrapping of Black Arrow in July and the failure of the Europa II launcher recently, but there was part compensation, however, in the success of Prospero launched by Black Arrow last month. These ups and downs in Britain's space programme have had little effect on the committee's faith in the future of space activities, and it concludes that the future participation of Britain in space is "inescapable".

"Space should be used wherever necessary or preferable to alternatives as a means to help the broader ends of national policy." The committee feels it is this basic principle that should be followed by Britain, but it recognizes that Britain cannot compete with Russia and the United States. The committee feels that it is the government's duty to ensure that "through national and international space programmes our scientists, engineers and technicians are able to play a full part in advancing the frontiers of knowledge in space and developing their skills in space and its associated technologies".

The committee poses the question of whether Britain should reconsider participation in a European launcher project and so reverse the decision of 1968 when Britain stopped financial support for Eldo. The committee, after reviewing available European launchers, reluctantly concludes, however, that it will be best for Britain to continue its present policy of buying American launchers as required.

In a plea to keep the British space effort at its present level the committee stresses there should be no reduction in British space effort now that Black Arrow has been scrapped. The committee recommends that gaps that are at present evident in the National Space Technology Programme should be filled by the transfer of resources from