Highbrow 'club' seeks the common touch

[LONDON] One of the few British scientists to enjoy a high media profile has taken on the daunting task of 'modernizing' one of the country's most distinguished centres for research and science communication: the Royal Institution.

The institution celebrates its bicentenary next year, and Susan Greenfield, its first woman director, plans to mark the occasion with major changes. Greenfield, professor of pharmacology at the University of Oxford, took up her job at the institution last month.

Greenfield says she is keen to take the institution's successful lecture-demonstrations to schools in Britain's deprived inner cities and to prisons to show how science can illustrate contemporary issues such as the dangers of drug abuse.

"I would like the Royal Institution to be perceived as a place that explains to all sectors of society — not just the middle classes — how the world is changing, why and what impact it will have on their lives," she says.

The institution was set up in 1799 by a group of well-connected scientists, and is housed in an impressive building off Piccadilly in central London. It has a research laboratory where 10 elements were discovered. Seven of its scientists have won Nobel prizes, including the father and son physicists Henry and Lawrence Bragg and the chemist George Porter.

The laboratory is now known as the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory after two of its early researchers, Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday. It still ranks among the world's top laboratories in solid-state chemistry, producing around 100 papers annually.

But the institution's founders had a second aim: to communicate the excitement of research to non-scientists. This was done by

All change: Greenfield (inset) wants to modernize the image of the Royal Institution's 'discourses'.

holding public lectures. Faraday also pioneered 'evening discourses' for members, and annual 'Christmas lectures for juveniles'. Despite the passage of time, the format and titles of many of the institution's activities remain largely unchanged. What are now known simply as 'Christmas Lectures' attract a television audience of two million, while 40,000 children visit the institution each year.

A degree of modernization was started seven years ago by Greenfield's predecessor, the chemist Peter Day, who helped put the finances back into the black — the institution has lost money for most of its history, and has come close to bankruptcy several times. Day organized the refurbishment of the building including its main lecture theatre.

Day encouraged the expansion of weekend 'master classes' around the country for mathematically able children, as well as an

outreach programme. Greenfield acknowledges that the "chattering classes" will remain one of the institution's target audiences. But she wants to change the organization's overall elitist image.

Another image she wants to replace is that of the scientist in the white coat — the traditional attire of Friday evening lecturers — "talking down" to people. Greenfield is keen to create a centre where the public, politicians, social scientists, and representatives of the arts and religious communities can meet and debate with scientists on equal terms.

"I'm not talking pedagogy here," she says. "People have fears about science. They don't want just to be told the facts. They need a place where their concerns can be voiced and debated, somewhere that's not all fizz and bang, but where there is discussion, thought and reflection."

Greenfield's views reflect a growing belief among Britain's science communicators of the need for a more 'bottom-up' approach. But the public understanding of science is just one initiative in what Greenfield promises to be a crowded agenda.

She is keen to find ways of supporting women returning to science after having children. She also plans to establish awards for science teachers, and lectures given by mid-career scientists who, although having good communication skills, would not under current practices be considered sufficiently well established to lecture at the Royal Institution.

It is an ambitious agenda, particularly as Greenfield plans to carry out her responsibilities at the Royal Institution for only part of the week. She is continuing with her neuroscience research at Oxford and with her involvement in Synaptica, a spin-off company developing drugs for Alzheimer's disease. She is also filming a BBC television series on the brain and the mind.

Ehsan Masood

UN climate organization faces criticism

[LONDON] The United Nations climate convention secretariat in Bonn has been heavily criticized for failing to follow standard UN procedures for managing its financial and administrative affairs.

In a report presented to the conference of the parties to the convention, which is being held this week in Buenos Aires, auditors from the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services found that staff were often untrained, and were overworked, particularly during the secretariat's move from Geneva to Bonn in August 1996.

In its reply, the secretariat says that most of the report's recommendations for addressing such problems have been implemented. But it notes that many recommendations cannot be fully implemented without extra administrative

staff, for which there is no provision in its budget.

Among the problems found by the auditors was the fact that the chief of administration during 1996 and 1997 had no experience in finance or accounting, and was not provided with a finance officer. They also found that proper selection procedures were not followed in recruiting consultants, and that their terms of reference were "sometimes very brief".

UN procedures state that the names of three candidates must be put forward for a consultant's post, with specific reasons for all recommendations. "In each of the cases we reviewed, only one candidate had been proposed for the contract, and no justification was provided for selection of the candidate," the report says.

E.M.