

international news

Flowers to head new European Science Foundation

THE European Science Foundation took a large step forward in Strasbourg last week with the election of officers and the creation of an executive council. Sir Brian Flowers, physicist and Rector of Imperial College, was elected President and the two Vice-Presidents are Professor O. Reverdin, a Greek scholar and Chairman of the Swiss Fond National and Dr P. Riis, a Danish physician. Secretary-General of the ESF will be Dr F. Schneider, at present Secretary-General to the Max-Planck Institut in Munich. Dr Schneider will work part-time in Strasbourg from January 1975 and eventually will be employed full-time by the foundation. Other officers will attend in Strasbourg for a couple of days a month on average, particularly for the meetings of the council of eighteen members. Britain has a second member on the council, Dr S. G. Owen of the Medical Research Council.

The ESF emerged as a concept when it became clear that there was considerable resistance to the idea of a pure research organisation being based on the EEC. Two of the most commonly heard arguments were that an ESF based on the Nine would be tied by the ponderous political procedures of Brussels and that learning knew no frontiers. Accordingly, and with the EEC's blessing, responsibility for the encouragement of European collaboration in the furtherance of research was passed on to an ESF comprised of representatives of almost all Western European countries, and there was a clear requirement that the body should have flexibility.

The word 'Science' in the title is interpreted in its broader European context of learning or knowledge. The 43 member organisations which sit in the assembly, the governing body of the ESF, thus comprise not only funding agencies such as research councils of the natural and medical sciences but also academies both of science and the humanities. The British seats in the assembly are occupied by the five research councils, the Royal Society and the British Academy.

The budget for the first year is to be 2.2 million French francs, most of which will go in administrative expenditures in Strasbourg; it is not envisaged that the ESF will become a funding agency. Rather it is seen as an enabling organisation, providing a forum for in-

ternational discussions on collaborative projects. There is to be no requirement that all members should agree on these projects; on occasions the ESF may simply serve as a template on which two or three research organisations in different countries can put together a scheme for which they have funds.

The success of ESF will clearly depend on its ability to show its useful-

ness within the first year or two, and Sir Brian already has a list of projects to which the council will give early consideration. These are:—

Astronomy This is seen as a top priority as it is a natural field for multi-lateral collaboration and any consequent trimming of large national budgets on astronomy would be a big plus for the young ESF.

Archaeological techniques Clearly the archaeology of various parts of Europe differs widely, but techniques are much the same everywhere. The pooling of equipment and facilities could be the first step into the humanities for the ESF.

Comparative legal systems Getting to know how different countries work is going to be part of the European experience of the next ten or twenty years.

Social responsibility in biology Does this have a European dimension? ESF as yet does not know, but EMBO will be consulted early on the plasmid engineering issue.

Outside comment on large institutions Sir Brian would like to see ESF playing the same role in Europe as the National Academy of Sciences has done in the United States in providing informed comment and criticism on organisations such as ESRO. This is bound to be a fairly controversial proposal and he has already been presumed by some to be seeking to get at ESRO. Does ESF yet have the weight for this sort of operation?

Marine biology Ireland is particularly keen to advance in this field.

Science policy There is thought to be scope within the ESF for discussions on the development of a more pan-European approach to policy-making.

Supporters of the ESF are at pains to point out that one of the first jobs of the foundation is to establish good working relations with the already-existing European-wide science and medical research council collaborative efforts. Since it is these councils at a national level which have been, *inter alios*, responsible for setting up the ESF this should not be a major difficulty.

In the longer run the ESF is seen as a body which national governments and international organisations will consult as a matter of course, if not as a legal necessity, on major matters of science and learning. □

Sir Brian Flowers

