

## Congress to vet NSF grants?

by Colin Norman, Washington

IN a move which is sending shivers of apprehension through the scientific community in the United States, the House of Representatives has decided that Congress should vet every research grant that the National Science Foundation (NSF) wants to award, and that it should have a chance to veto those considered to be a waste of taxpayers' money. A little-noted amendment designed to do just that was attached to an otherwise routine budget bill last week, in spite of an urgent plea by one Congressman that to pass the measure would constitute "an act of public and scientific irresponsibility".

Even if the amendment does not survive passage through the rest of the Congressional mill—it must be approved by the Senate before it becomes law, and its prospects there are far from certain—the fact that the House passed it provides ominous signs of growing political disenchantment with expenditures on some kinds of basic research. Put more bluntly, it is clear that some Congressmen have discovered that many research projects provide plump targets through which they can show the folks back home that they are doing their bit to hold down public expenditure.

The amendment simply states that the NSF must supply Congress each month with details of all the research projects it wants to support, and that Congress should have 30 days in which to exercise a veto over any grant that it considers unworthy. A resolution passed by either the House or the Senate would be sufficient to kill any such project.

Although the amendment does not suggest any criteria by which Congress should judge the scientific worth of

research projects, it asks the NSF to provide "all facts, circumstances and considerations relating to or bearing upon the decision of the National Science Foundation to approve said grants, including to the maximum extent practicable the manner in which the national interest will be fostered by the approval of such grants". Since the NSF awards about 14,000 grants each year, the measure would clearly be an administrative nightmare if it ever reached the law books.

Why has the House suddenly turned sour on the NSF? Part of the reason is the widespread publicity accorded to some broadsides recently delivered by Senator William Proxmire against a handful of the NSF's research programmes, and another factor is that the NSF has been caught up in a bitter controversy over school textbooks. The whole business, in fact, provides an excellent example of the irrational manner in which many policy decisions are taken in the United States.

The NSF's troubles began a few weeks ago when Proxmire, an influential and entertaining man who is closely watched by the press, launched an attack on a few NSF social science programmes by the time-honoured tactic of firing off press releases holding up the research to ridicule. In the space of a couple of weeks, he poured scorn on a study on romantic love, a project entitled "Hitchhiking, a Viable Addition to a Multimodal Transportation System", a study of the "Social Behaviour of Alaskan Brown Bears", and a "Preliminary Investigation of a Special Impact of Television on Blacks".

Even without Proxmire's stamp, the press releases would have been guaranteed newspaper space, for the study on romantic love—which Proxmire termed the "boondoggle of the month"—was so juicy that it was carried by virtually every newspaper in the country, from the *New York Times* downwards. No

matter that the study was designed to investigate why so many marriages end in divorce, which is not an irrelevant factor in family life in the United States, the attacks precipitated a spate of reports of supposedly trivial or useless research projects being supported by government funds. Particularly prominent was a list of projects with funny-sounding names which was broadcast by Paul Harvey, a radio commentator whose utterances are carried by scores of local stations.

Although many of the projects on Harvey's list date back to the early 1960s and have long since been terminated, the upshot of all the publicity was that members of Congress have been deluged with letters from their constituents complaining about wastage of government funds. Since constituents' mail provides an indication of voter sympathies, which few Congressmen can afford to ignore, the NSF suddenly found itself on the receiving end of a good deal of flak.

One example of a trivial research project, which was mentioned during the debate and which has attracted a good deal of publicity, is a \$70,000 study of perspiration in Aborigines. Though that study has attracted much ridicule, it was in fact designed by the Department of Defense in the hope of finding a way to prevent soldiers from becoming dehydrated in tropical climates after many hours without water—a problem which does not seem to be encountered by Aborigines.

Such ill-informed attacks on the NSF's research programmes are by no means new, and they would probably have had little impact this year had it not been for another dispute about the foundation's activities. That dispute concerns a school science course developed in the 1960s by the Educational Development Centre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with NSF funding. Called "Man: a Course of Study" (MACOS), it is a collection of films,

It is now a year since the European Space Agency (ESA) was to have subsumed the role of ESRO (the European Space Research Organisation) and what was left of that of the European Launcher Development Organisation (ELDO). It was then that ESRO's Director-General Dr Hocker, completed his term of office, making way for an appointment to the new post of Director-General of the ESA. In the event the two got inextricably twisted together and the situation became further confused by the French government's overall review of its science budget and the future of the Ariane launch rocket development which had been accepted as part of the 'European' package.

At last the situation is clarifying. The appointment of a permanent Director-General has been at the root of the whole impasse and it is now clear that the compromise candidate Roy Gibson has been accepted by the two rivals in sponsorship, the French and Germans. They have agreed to drop their respective national candidates and accept the Englishman, who has been doing the job on an acting basis and under considerable difficulties for the past year.

A specially summoned meeting of the space ministers of the 10 member countries, the European Space Conference, is convening in Brussels this week to confirm the appointment. Seven directors to complete the ESA

top management will be announced at the same time. The organisation has been running with three directors short since last year.

It is expected that the same ministerial meeting will decide one way or another on the formula now put forward by the French for ESA participation in the operating costs of the French launch range of Kurou in Guiana from which the Ariane launching rocket is to fly. The switch to the French-designed rocket has also involved a change of launch range. The previous Europa launcher based on the British Blue Streak was launched from Woomera, Australia where at one time the Australians were offering to pay all the operating costs. *Angela Croome*