Same song, different meaning

Chris Sherwell reports on the latest developments on the European Community's research front

THE EEC's Council of Research Ministers did their turn again at the end of last week when they met in Luxembourg. In most respects it was a repeat performance of a long-running drama, but it did have the added merit of a new act to take it further towards the worthy ending it has so far lacked.

The Ministers were unable to make the crucial and much-delayed decision on the siting of the Joint European Torus (JET), the Community's sorely afflicted fusion project. It was that which made the meeting a repeat performance. But earlier expectations of progress on this particular matter had begun to die anyway, principally because the whole issue has in recent months become inextricably intertwined with the Community's four-year joint research programme, now under discussion.

When the Ministers left Luxembourg they had at least resolved a good deal concerning JET apart from the site. They were able to agree certain details regarding financial arrangements (though not others), as well as the project's legal status. It was these accords which helped mainly to redeem the show, but until the site is decided they can have little real practical meaning.

The meeting agreed that the European Commission will put up 80% of the costs, with the host country bearing 10% and the other participating countries the remaining 10%. The host country will also meet the costs associated with supplying the site with basics and with dismantling the project on completion in several years' time. At that point the equipment will be the host country's property. The Ministers further agreed that the project was a "joint enterprise", that is, independent of the host country and a Community project to be identified as such.

They were, however, unable to decide on staff numbers, although there was agreement that the host country would second people to the project and that others would be engaged as temporary agents of the Commission. Outstanding matters will be discussed by the member states' permanent representatives in Brussels, as will another issue, the precise costs involved. Since the Commission contribution of 108 million units of account (at March 1975 prices) was agreed, costs have risen and the project is being talked of in terms

of a four-year construction effort rather than five years. Some modification may therefore be necessary.

Much of this was largely in line with Commission proposals made a couple of weeks earlier. Regarding the site, however, the Commission was in favour of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) at Ispra in Italy—itsself nothing new—but had made a new proposal should no Council decision be reached before the end of the year. In that event, it suggested, the matter should be passed over to the Commission itself, which would then decide on the basis of an opinion from its own JET committee—which decided matters by a two-thirds majority.

This, a precedent which did not look like attracting many Ministers, was not discussed in Luxembourg. Another complication had already crept in some weeks earlier, when it was agreed to discuss JET in the context of the four-year joint research programme. Although designed to hasten agreement on the JET site, it introduced a bargaining element well suited to Community *realpolitik*. With details of the research programme themselves matter of dispute, movement on JET became contingent upon movement on the research programme.

At last week's meeting demands concerning the programme came, perhaps ironically, from three of the four main contenders for JET—Britain, France and Germany. Britain's starting position, on which it is flexible, was to seek reductions in staff of about 20% and cuts in certain expenditures amounting to £15 million at the Community's four research centres. Italy argued that this would threaten the centres, especially Ispra, the fourth JET contender. No one is saying that Italy and the Commission are now preparing for the worst, but there is speculation that if JET isn't to go to Ispra only a large alternative research programme—perhaps the one proposed, intact—would provide sufficient compensation.

Certainly the British were keen to emphasise that the site decision ought to be taken on scientific and technical grounds only. That would help the Culham site's case, but there would still be the matter of the French and German sites of Cadarache and Garching. Of the two, Germany with its stronger economy is the stronger candidate, yet the opportunity to strengthen its case still further through a higher host country contribution was apparently allowed to pass. French

research faces similar problems to Britain's, but this may say more about the relative weakness of its candidacy than Britain's ability to take on the project. The latter's enthusiasm for the project going to Culham remains undiluted by the current crisis facing its research community and economy generally.

As the Luxembourg meeting broke up the recipe was there for a good deal of haggling between the parties between now and the next Research Ministers' meeting on November 18. The understandings reached on JET and the joint research programme are provisional until a decision on the JET site is reached. If that decision, already delayed a year, is not made then, it could pass directly to the Council of Prime Ministers. If they didn't agree and refused to leave the matter to others, the Commission could go on funding the project in the way it has done hitherto. The fate of the project, however, will be more uncertain than ever. □

● The European Science Foundation (ESF), members of which are national research councils and academies in Europe, is due to hold its general assembly in Strasbourg this week. The Foundation involves a total of 43 member organisations from sixteen European countries. The President of the Executive Council, which will present its second report to the assembly, is Sir Brian Flowers, the UK physicist.

The Foundation aims to encourage the emergence of a close-knit community of science and research in Europe; this is also a goal of the EEC proper, with which the ESF has links through the Director General for Research, Science and Education at the European Commission. The ESF endeavours to do this by providing a forum for the exchange of information and experience, particularly regarding the way the member organisations actually operate. It also seeks by this method to encourage activity aimed at producing joint European action in certain fields.

As an international non-governmental non-profit organisation it lacks the financial means to give effect to its advice, but it can and does examine specific areas and maintains contacts with other concerned organisations, like EMBO and ESA. The Executive Council reports further progress in such areas as astronomy, space science, genetic manipulation and mathematics, in all of which it had sought to take initiatives during its first year of existence.