

nature

November 11, 1976

The cost of Swiss francs

It is fashionable to see the late 1960s as a period when science on a worldwide basis went through a major transition, emerging with a much-changed relationship with society in general. That transition, even if major, was at least fairly gradual and allowed for steady adjustment in values amongst scientists. In later years we may well look at 1976 and decide that here was a second equally drastic transition, but one which occurred in the course of weeks rather than years and which affected only Britain. The continuing weakness of the pound—a result not of irresponsible financial journalism, nor even of sterling's role as a reserve currency, but of long-term industrial inadequacy to compete successfully in overseas or even domestic markets—is precipitating a serious crisis of confidence among many scientists about the will, let alone the ability, of Britain to continue as a pre-eminent scientific nation. Much of this alarm is exaggerated, there is no doubt, and there is a danger that we all think ourselves into a worse crisis than really exists.

The details barely need repeating now. Every cent that the pound drops on the foreign exchange markets adds nearly £200,000 to the money that has to be found by the Science Research Council (SRC) to pay international subscriptions, notably to CERN, the European Space Agency, and the Institut von Laue-Langevin. The CERN subscription, at over £20 million, is by far the greatest. The recent downward trend of the pound has thus meant severe economies for domestic programmes in no way related to high-energy physics, even those of other research councils. It has also meant that Britain has had to put out some very careful feelers to CERN and its member states for sympathetic understanding.

What are the options at Geneva? It would conceivably be possible to pull out of specific projects there by way of economy. There has been recent speculation about dropping out of the Intersecting Storage Rings programme, which provides collisions at the highest energy in the world. But there seems no evidence at all that Britain has either taken or intends to take any such step, which would be the most ham-fisted way of disrupting CERN's operations. The danger is that such speculation,

especially in an international framework, can easily turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is much more likely that SRC, if it fails to convince the Treasury that support for an international treaty should be detached from a national policy on cash limits, will go to CERN to see if there is any way that the UK can reduce its overall contribution while maintaining its membership of all programmes. It goes without saying that to have to do this would hardly enhance our reputation as a partner in European ventures.

It is difficult as yet to predict how our partners in CERN would react to such an approach. No other country seems to be experiencing similar problems; Italy might seem the most vulnerable but pays directly from its Foreign Ministry, which has been in the habit of paying without question. One suspects, however, that there will be genuine support, provided that this is not to be an annual affair. The only difficulty is that the Germans, who might logically be bearers of a greater burden, already contribute 25% of CERN's budget, which is the limit that any country may carry. Thus any load shed by Britain could possibly prove an embarrassment for a smaller country to pick up.

But where in all this is the turning point for British science? Will this not seem a relatively minor ripple in hindsight? There are grounds for thinking otherwise, that the affair could polarise the scientific community to its great detriment. There has, of course, for some time been a substantial "anti-big science" feeling only just below the surface in many sectors of the community; the events of the past few weeks with their resultant stringencies across the board can hardly have helped dissipate this feeling. On the other hand the high-energy physicists now make no secret of dissatisfaction with the way SRC plans to shift emphasis in its domestic funding. In particular many are expressing a new-found concern at the council's growing emphasis on engineering research.

Whatever the merits of either of these points of view, they are symptomatic of dangerous splits and uncreative tensions which could very easily harm Britain's research potential and lead her down a depressing road to second-rate status. □