

IN BRIEF

CERN subscription

At the time of going to press, it seems that the crisis over British international subscriptions, particularly to CERN, has been resolved. The problem arose because the government has been operating a strict cash limits policy, whilst subscriptions to international bodies have grown with the decline in the pound. In the Winter Supplementary Estimates, however, it has been possible to raise the Science cash limits by £2.5 million whilst dropping the University limits by the same amount. This step will not affect any university grants already announced — it

comes from an operational reserve now regarded as more than adequate. The remaining £3.5 million needed to fulfil the subscriptions comes from a variety of sources, the main being a CERN refund of £0.6 million on previous programmes and a re-examination of allowable accounting procedures for research councils in dealing with commissioned research.

Swedes propose nuclear law

New Swedish power stations will not be able to begin operating until they can

demonstrate that reprocessing and disposal of spent fuel can be carried out "in a completely safe manner" if a proposal made by the government last week becomes law in March as expected.

All companies building nuclear power stations would have to specify in detail in what form the spent fuel would be deposited and how the radioactive waste would be transported. The legislation would not affect the six Swedish reactors already in action or being loaded in preparation for action, but would apply to the four at present under construction.

SOME things are done very differently in the United States and in Britain. We are told that Mr Jimmy Carter, the President-elect, will have to appoint some 3,000 people in various offices. Many of those chosen may be rewarded for political services, others may be apolitical and some may even, in the past, have been his opponents. Though Mr Carter will not himself be able to choose each individual personally, he clearly bears a direct responsibility for the whole operation.

In Britain, particularly in the scientific field, changes of government have no immediate effect on the majority of appointments, and there is no wholesale turnover of office holders following a general election. Different governments have made many changes in the pattern of scientific management, generally with unfortunate results, but these have usually been implemented by a process of "general post" with the same faces reappearing with different titles and slightly different responsibilities.

Britain differs most from America in that the way in which many appointments are filled is shrouded in mystery. The full-time senior scientific posts, within government ministries, are mostly filled by the normal civil service machinery, though in many cases the methods by which the office holders are selected are as closely guarded as the register and membership of Cabinet committees. However, the results of this method are generally satisfactory, and sometimes brilliantly successful.

What is even less well understood, however, is the way in which the chairmen and members of influential bodies like our research councils or of the Nature Conservancy Council (whose ancestor was an independent research council until 1965) are selected. Although there are some very square pegs which have been thrust into round holes, in most cases the choice of members has been un-

exceptionable. Some have been active in science and have done distinguished research; a few are still active in their own fields. What is more doubtful is whether they are always the right men (I use the word deliberately, for few are women) to

By appointment**KENNETH MELLANBY**

carry out the duties now apparently expected of them.

It is generally believed that the idea of the independent research council, financed by government, was a good one, and did much to foster high-grade research in Britain. Originally the councils included laymen, some even being politically active members of both Houses of Parliament. The councils' functions were exercised by comparatively infrequent meetings to determine, or more often to approve, major questions of policy, and they interfered little with the general organisation of research and never with the actual work of the scientists they employed. From time to time there were criticisms, such as that even their most senior scientists were excluded from

membership of their own research councils.

I once heard this justified by a member, who said that it would clearly be improper for an employee to be a member of his own governing body. The speaker was a professor much engaged in university affairs; he was temporarily disconcerted when I suggested that his membership of his university's Council and Senate was, by analogy, equally improper. However, most of the active scientists probably preferred the freedom of their laboratories, and seldom hankered after public office.

Today members of these councils seem to be expected to take a much more active part in their work. Many of them are now paid a modest salary which, being honourable men, they feel they must earn. So meetings of the councils themselves, of their committees, working parties and preparatory groups take place interminably. The employed staff, including scientists who should be doing full-time research, spend more and more time "servicing" these meetings (though they are generally excluded from the more important sessions). My general impression is that all this extra work is almost entirely counter-productive, resulting in less and worse rather than more and better research. This is surely what might have been expected. Where research is concerned, no committee has ever had an original idea. The more such committees meet, the more they are likely to obstruct research.

Research councils are now complaining about their shortage of funds. If they ceased to pay their own members and if they met less often this would set free a modest sum to pay a few more bench workers. But more important, the reduction in the time wasted on and by the committees would do much to ensure that a greater proportion of the funds could be spent more fruitfully.