

NSF reorganizes for industrial research

Washington

The great White House hope that scientific research can be harnessed to the cause of industrial innovation has evoked a quick response elsewhere in the United States government. Other agencies are understandably keen to share in the action. At the National Science Foundation, the most immediate result will be to precipitate the reorganisation over which the National Science Board has been agonizing for several months.

Reorganization will dominate the agenda for a public meeting between the acting director of the Foundation, Dr Donald N. Langenberg, some members of the National Science Board and the chairmen of the foundation's advisory committees which has been arranged for Saturday this week (13 September). The meeting will be open to members of the public, who will be able to chip in.

The National Science Board is hoping to have completed these and other consultations in time to make a final decision at its meeting in October. Failure to do so would mean that the proposed reorganization could not be built into the federal budget cycle, which might mean that some changes could not be carried out until October 1982.

The most obvious effect of the proposed reorganization will be to rename the Directorate of Engineering and Applied Science the Directorate of Engineering. More than nomenclature is involved, however — it is intended that each of the existing directorates of the NSF should be more directly concerned with the needs of applied science, while the new Engineering Directorate should vigorously support engineering research in universities.

Novel and explicit mechanisms for fostering industrial innovation are thus not a part of the proposed reorganization. Rather, the NSF is relying on the authority it already has to support industrial research. The scheme for funding joint industry-university projects is doing well. The NSF is also proud of the cooperative research centre in polymer science established at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (and now entirely supported by industrial companies). The analogous research centre for the furniture industry in North Carolina has been less successful.

These proposals are likely to win support. There will be more dispute about the proposal, part of the same package, to set up a Social Science Directorate even though the chief effect would be a repackaging of existing divisions (including the new programme in "decision and management" science). One objection is almost certain to be that "neural sciences", linked with "behavioural science", should not be separated from the rest of biology.

Under the new scheme, the foundation's existing rag-bag directorate (for Scientific, Technological and International Affairs) would take over responsibility for programmes such as those for supporting small business research and affirmative action of various kinds.

By Saturday's meeting, NSF will no doubt have been spurred on by Congressman George Brown's congressional subcommittee, to which Dr Lewis Branscombe (Chairman of the National Science Board) and Dr Langenberg are due to give evidence. Mr Brown is using his bill to set up a National Technology Foundation (unlikely ever to become law) as a way of urging on

everybody in sight the importance of research as a spur to industrial innovation and production.

Meanwhile, the Department of Commerce has stolen a march on other potential competitors for the new funds that may become available in January by announcing its plans to set up three cooperative industrial research centres dealing with welding, lubrication and powdered metal processing. The Department of Commerce will spend \$5.2 million of its own money on the projects, for which proposals are being sought, and hopes that its own contributions to the cost of the centres will shrink to 20 per cent after five years.

Appointments and elections ahead

Washington

After several nail-biting weeks, it now seems that the US Senate will confirm the nomination of Dr John B. Slaughter as Director of the National Science Foundation some time during the week beginning 15 September. It is now thought that the differences, political and procedural, which have arisen over Dr Slaughter's nomination as NSF director (originally announced early in July), will be found to have melted away (or to have been buried) at a meeting of the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources due to be held tomorrow, 12 September.

The first stumbling block to Dr Slaughter's confirmation was ironically the reinvocation by Republicans in the Senate of a principle first mentioned by Democrats in the closing months of the first Nixon Administration in 1972 — the doctrine that fixed-term presidential appointments should not be confirmed as soon as this before a presidential election.

Formally, the directorship of the NSF is a six-year appointment, although the statutes allow the President to remove a director from office at any time. In practice, however, a president following such a course would have to contend with the scientific community's view that the directorship of the NSF is not a political appointment in the ordinary sense. Dr Slaughter, when his appointment is confirmed, will be especially hard to dislodge, for he would be the first black American to head an important agency.

Technically, Dr Slaughter's confirmation as NSF director awaits only the vote of the US Senate as a whole, having been recommended ("reported out") by Senator Edward Kennedy's subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research. In practice, the recommendation is flawed by the way in which Democratic members of the subcommittee carried it without a proper quorum. Nobody wants the issue to

be debated by the Senate as a whole. The emollient now discovered is a full meeting of the Committee on Labor and Human Relations at which Dr Slaughter's nomination will be on the agenda but (it is hoped) not discussed. The White House has no doubt been reminded of the quip, usually an ethnic slur, "with friends like that, who needs enemies?"

Dr Slaughter's problems (and the NSF's) may melt away, but Dr Al Carnesale, the putative chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, is certain to have a rougher ride. Carnesale's nomination, the confirmation of which is in the gift of a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, is frankly acknowledged to be political, and for a specific reason. Carnesale, now a tenured professor at the Kennedy Institute at Harvard University, is committed to the view that breeder reactors are economically irrelevant while the price of uranium is as low as at present. Mr Ronald Reagan, the Republican presidential candidate, disagrees. The chances are that in the circumstances Dr Carnesale will have to bide his time until after the election.

Speculation about other post-election changes is already rife, and the odds are shortening on the proposition that Dr Frank Press, now the President's Science Advisor and Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, will finish up next spring as president of the National Academy of Sciences. A spokesman of the NAS confirmed last week that Dr Press is a "leading candidate" to succeed Dr Philip Handler, whose second six-year term ends next June.

Procedurally, however, there is a long way to go before this appointment will be decided. Proposals by the nominating committee have to be approved by the Council of the Academy in October.

The by-laws of the academy require that the nominating committee should "assure itself that each proposed nominee will be