

of qualified staff. An estimated 70 temporary staff will be needed in addition to the 2,600 permanent staff. However, the Commission emphasizes that other nuclear safety programmes will not be robbed of their present staff.

The biggest arguments in Coreper are likely to revolve around the timing of the project. Work on the loop has already begun at Ispra and to keep Essor unoccupied now will only lose money. But while the Commission is urging that the project should start in earnest immediately, the nuclear safety programmes' consultative committee wants the project's first phase to be extended for 6–12 months so that more feasibility studies can be carried out. However, financial support from third parties may tip the balance in favour of an early start. Three United States organizations — the Department of Energy, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Electric Power Research Institute — are all considering participation, as are Japan and Sweden.

Jasper Becker

Data protection laws

UK lags behind

The United Kingdom seems on the point of becoming a "data desert" following its decision not to sign the Council of Europe's convention on data protection and privacy. On 28 January, seven European states signed the convention, which requires them to enact legislation defining the rights of individuals over the formation and use of files concerning them. All these states except one (Turkey) already have such laws. When ratified by the parliaments of five signatories, the convention will pass into force.

Britain must establish a domestic policy first, said ministers questioned in Parliament last week. But the issue has been under debate in Britain for ten years, and it is two years since the Lindop committee on data protection produced its report and recommendations. Mr William Whitelaw, Secretary of State for the Home Office, last October promised a policy statement "shortly". But there is now little sign that a statement will be forthcoming in the present session of Parliament.

It is a matter of human rights, but also of commercial interest. Companies argue that contracts involving protected data from outside countries will be lost to the United Kingdom, as Britain will be seen as a potential information leak. And this information can concern companies as well as individuals: the Council of Europe convention is defined in terms of "legal persons", which may include registered businesses.

Already, according to International Computers Ltd, a number of small deals with Sweden — the first in Europe to enact data laws — have been affected. Austria is also beginning to pay close attention to the

nature of the data that cross its borders. So far there has been no serious commercial effect; but the European laws are only just beginning to operate.

In the United Kingdom, bodies from IBM to the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) support the spirit of the Lindop report — that there should be legislation within five (now three) years. Opposition stems from government departments whose data handling might be most affected by legislation: the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Security. The Department of Industry backs the data industry's view that legislation is necessary, although the appointment last year of a junior minister for information industries (Mr Adam Butler) specifically excluded data protection from his portfolio.

Lindop recommended the establishment of an agency which would initially coordinate views and propose legislation to Parliament (thus by-passing departments and ministers). Later the body would register and license protected files and uses of files.

Such an authority is regarded by NCCL as a necessary democratic safeguard. But commercial interests, while recognizing the need for independence, are fearful of a centralized bureaucracy. IBM, involved in most countries, favours the decentralized German system. There, firms and government agencies holding sensitive files must appoint an ombudsman who then bears legal responsibility for ensuring that files are properly constituted and used. Costs are thereby distributed to the file owners, rather than being a matter for central government.

The system also avoids the danger — so IBM thinking goes — of a "Balkanization" of data transfers, which might occur when national protection agencies attempted to agree on this or that data flow between their countries. Another way out, however, would be the wide adoption of a convention such as that drawn up by the Council of Europe.

Broadly, the Council of Europe convention — which is open to states outside the European region — commits ratifying states to enact legislation requiring that personal data be lawfully obtained, accurate and relevant, and that its use be restricted to approved purposes. Any information recorded on race, politics, religion, health, sexual behaviour and criminality is subject to extra safeguards — although the convention may be over-ridden in extreme cases involving state security, public fraud and crime.

The signatories so far are Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Sweden and Turkey. Within Europe, Norway also has data protection legislation but has not yet signed the convention. Outside Europe, the United States and Canada have legislation. It is being considered at one level or another in most developed states. **Robert Walgate**

European astronomy

Winning ways

Hard on the heels of the race for the Space Telescope Institute, won by Johns Hopkins University last month, comes a similar competition in Europe. Four astrophysical institutes are competing for the European Coordinating Facility that will analyse and store space telescope data for European astronomers. The winner is expected to be announced by the European Space Agency (ESA) in June.

The competitors are the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, the European Southern Observatory, Munich, the Observatoire de Paris and the Italian Institute for Astrophysics, Frascati. They have submitted bids to have their own hardware used to store the data and develop programs for analysing them.

European astronomers will be allocated at least 15 per cent of the space telescope's observing time. Observers, who will only be a fraction of those wishing to use the telescope, will typically spend one or two weeks at Johns Hopkins and then return to Europe with their data for further analysis. Astronomers working at institutes with hardware compatible with that of the coordinating facility will be able to use its programs either by accessing them directly through computer links or by applying for tapes through the post.

Observers will have exclusive rights to their data for one year after which they will be available to the whole astrophysical community. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration and ESA have recently agreed that all space telescope data should be stored at the European facility as well as the Space Telescope Institute.

The European facility will most probably use a VAX 11/780 computer manufactured by the DS Digital Corporation. In an effort to increase the compatibility of hardware, several astrophysical institutes in Europe have decided to adopt this computer over the past year. Of the four competitors for the facility, the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, with links to five other nodes in Britain, has the most highly developed system based on the VAX 11/780, making it perhaps the most likely winner. But the other competitors could catch up. There are plans to link Frascati's computer to other nodes in Italy and several computers compatible with VAX 11/780 are already linked in France.

Most of the cost of the coordinating facility will be met by the chosen institute. Although all candidates have suitable hardware, some could be required to expand their facilities more than others, involving them in considerable expense. ESA will provide only modest support: about £50,000 towards start up costs and thereafter £25,000 a year for incidental expenses plus seven staff salaries.

Judy Redfeare