

Laboratory animals

European convention in sight?

EVERY six months or so since 1978 an *ad hoc* committee set up by the 21-nation Council of Europe has met in Strasbourg, France, to perfect a "Convention for the protection of animals used for experimental purposes". The committee's deliberations are at last nearing an end, and by the end of the next meeting, on 26-29 April, the convention may be nearly ready.

In the same week that the committee meets, the democratically elected European Parliament will also be airing the issue. Last December the parliament took evidence from animal welfare groups and others at a public hearing in Strasbourg. This evidence is now being assessed and the draft version of the convention is on the agenda for the parliament's next sitting at the end of April. Eventually the parliament will make recommendations to the EEC Council of Ministers.

In Britain there has been steady pressure for new legislation to regulate the use of animals in laboratories, at present licensed under the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876. In the past few years two private members' bills have floundered, one in the House of Commons and one in the House of Lords, and one reason for the absence of government support that might have seen one of the bills through to the statute book was the prospect of a European Convention on which to base the national law.

The five British committee members (the "academic" representatives are Professor Alice Steele-Bodger and Dr Charles Coid of the Home Office advisory committee on animal experimentation) must make their contribution to the final wording of the convention against the background of an increasingly aggressive campaign against the use of animals in research on any terms. Recent action by animal welfare groups has included break-ins to release animals from laboratories, and last weekend demonstrators gained considerable publicity by chaining themselves to the railings outside the Prime Minister's residence in Downing



Street (result shown below).

So whilst few scientists are likely to claim that an act passed in 1876 is comprehensive enough to regulate the wide range of uses of animals today, updating the law has intrinsic risks when the major pressure for reform comes from groups that see it as only a first step towards banning the use of animals in research altogether.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) claims to have a more realistic view than the extremists. At the parliamentary public hearing last December, the RSPCA presented evidence on behalf of the Eurogroup for Animal Welfare aimed at safeguarding the welfare of animals in laboratories. The RSPCA's case not surprisingly concentrates on the pain that animals might suffer, and the "pain condition" is a subject that has contributed to the delays on the *ad hoc* committee. The draft convention states that if an animal suffers severe and enduring pain the experiment should be stopped and the animal killed, and the argument has been about whether there is a need for exemptions to the clause.

One of the convention's basic principles is that animals used in experiments should



be specifically bred for the purpose. This point is considered of vital importance by animal welfare groups, although researchers who work on stray, feral or farm animals, many destined to be killed anyway, claim that such a restriction would needlessly increase the number of animals bred for research, hardly in line with the goal of those who would protect animals.

And another of the requirements in early drafts of the convention might lead to animated discussions: "An animal shall not be used in a procedure if another satisfactory method is reasonably and practically available". That should add fire to the usually inconclusive arguments between tissue culture protagonists and others over how well an *in vitro* system can or cannot mimic the animal. **Charles Wenz**

UK education

A central role

THE British Government appears to be heading for a conflict with school-teachers as well as with their employers, the local education authorities which are statutorily responsible for running primary and secondary schools. By convention and on one reading of the 1944 Education Act, the content of what is taught in schools is the responsibility of local authorities alone, and the once-formidable corps of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools have become largely advisory.

Since 1976, however, British governments have become more adventurous, offering advice on the ideal content of a "core curriculum" for example. Last week, however, Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, went further than any of his predecessors by issuing detailed instructions on physics examinations to be administered to students at 16-plus by the newly formed joint council of examinations boards.

The specificity of Sir Keith's opinion will give the most direct offence. While the examinations council had proposed that experimental skills in physics might be tested by means of written examination questions, Sir Keith now says that only a practical test will suffice to measure "the combination of intellectual and manipulative skills" he seeks to encourage.

Sir Keith's letter also takes issue with the council's view that electronics should not

be a part of its proposed core of secondary-school physics, asking that its proposals should be modified in such a way as to ensure that all students should learn something about electronic devices. On the other hand, Sir Keith suggests that the examination proposals should "omit all reference" to the "social and economic issues" arising from scientific developments on the grounds that students would then be distracted from the main objectives of science teaching and because it would be difficult to "avoid tendentiousness in the teaching of science subjects".

Reaction to these developments is, for the time being, stunned silence, but it will obviously now be harder for the new examinations council effectively to discharge the job for which it was created — simplifying and coordinating the jungle of 16-plus examinations at present administered by a score of different examinations boards.

The impending row about examinations will be further inflamed by the appearance this week of a Government White Paper (*Teaching Quality*, Cmnd 8836, HMSO, £3.40) in which Sir Keith Joseph, assisted by his opposite number for Wales, outlines a series of measures for the improvement of the quality of teachers. These range from a proposal that the selection of intending teachers, and the criteria for approving the training courses followed, should be made more rigorous to a requirement that those who train them should have recent practical experience of teaching in a school and a suggestion that good teachers might be paid extra.