

UK research councils

Demand for cuts angers science council's staff

AS IF ITS budgetary problems were not enough, the UK Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) has also to consider its response to a recent review of its activities by the British Government's cost-cutting unit. The draft report, which has not yet been published, claims that savings of £3.3 million could be achieved on capital costs and £450,000 a year on running costs. Suggested measures include the loss of 50 jobs, the sale of Herstmonceux Castle (which forms a substantial part of the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO)) and the possible merger of the Royal Observatory Edinburgh with RGO. A staff response to the report maintains that it is based on insufficient consultation, incorrect assumptions and a lack of consideration for wider scientific issues.

The unit that carried out the scrutiny was set up by Sir Derek Rayner at the instigation of the Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, to cut a swathe through the tangled undergrowth of public expenditure with the aim of cutting costs and increasing efficiency. It has prepared draft reports on the Medical, Agricultural and Natural Environment Research Councils as well as SERC. As part of its procedure, one or more members of the councils joined their respective scrutiny teams which also included representatives of the Department of Education and Science and the Management and Personnel Office. Responses have been or are being prepared by both the staff and management sides of the councils, and the collected reports will then be sent to Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science.

Financially, the most significant of the recommendations made in the report on SERC concern the sale of Herstmonceux Castle and of 95 houses owned by SERC and rented to people working at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. Between them these recommendations would, according to the report, result in a capital saving of £2.55 million, together with decreased recurrent costs at the castle. (The report points out that under current regulations the proceeds of the sale would have to be paid to the Treasury and advocates a change so that the council can benefit more directly.) Both recommendations are attacked in the reply from SERC's staff.

The castle at RGO houses a substantial archive of astronomical records and the observatory's library, meeting rooms, etc. The Rayner unit maintains that the archive is "little used" and that it would be more appropriately kept by the Public Records Office, while other facilities could be accommodated by constructing an extension to the other main portion of the obser-

vatory, the West Building complex which accommodates most of the staff.

In its reply, the staff maintains that the Rayner unit has, through lack of consultation, under-estimated the importance of the archives for astronomical research, that a substantial number of people make use of them and that the Public Records Office itself is "firmly of the opinion" that RGO should house the archives.

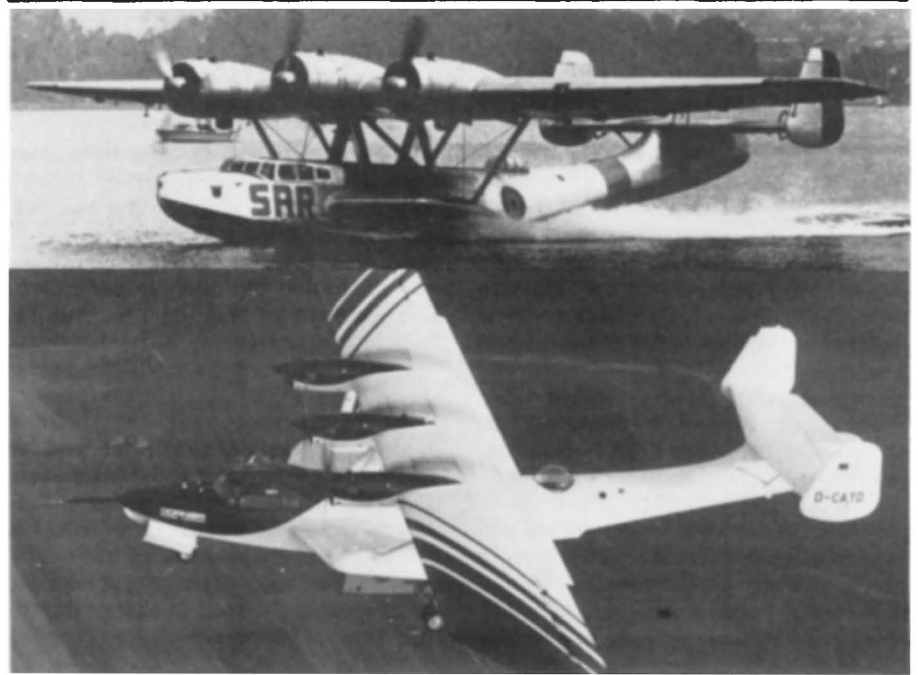
Other recommendations concerning RGO's on-site facilities have infuriated the staff. RGO's role is increasingly related to operation and support of observatories at such remote sites as La Palma in the Canary Islands. "The nature of the work at the observatories", says the report, "has therefore changed as the on-site facilities have become obsolete." The staff replies that here the Rayner unit lacks relevant experience and has stepped outside the bounds of its remit. Surprisingly, the report does not mention the development at RGO of the much-publicized remote control of telescopes which is expected to increase the number of observers visiting the observatory.

The Ray0028-0836/83/270002-02501.00 lations for RGO suggest that, by selling the castle and some of the land, £1.1 million capital and

associated running costs could be saved. The report also recommends that the implications of a merger of RGO and the Royal Observatory Edinburgh should be assessed by SERC before April 1984. "This", says the staff reply, "really does smack of a preconceived idea being ventilated and is a problem of such complexity that the inspection team itself has merely asked the question of council . . . Our attitude, from the RGO point of view, is that the report can be summarized as arriving at very drastic conclusions after very minimal consultation."

Other recommendations by the Rayner unit appear to have fewer scientific ramifications. The 95 houses used by SERC as accommodation at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory have a freehold value of £2.5 million, the rents and costs such as maintenance being roughly balanced. SERC is not paying for loans on these houses, so that the arguments concern such imponderables as the value of the houses in helping to recruit staff. The remainder of the recommendations concern details of maintenance, building supervision and stores which would, according to the report, save £448,000 a year in running costs and cut 54 posts. Many of these are opposed by the staff.

The SERC management refuses to discuss the report in detail, but expects to have prepared its response by the end of July. It is, however, likely to be sceptical of the major recommendations. Whether the issues raised will ever be publicly discussed is not at this stage clear. **Philip Campbell**



THE Dornier aircraft company of West Germany is evoking old memories of magnificent flying machines by toying with this 20-40 seater flying amphibian, a modest redesign of the Second World War flying boat the Do24. The old aircraft, pictured above in service with the Spanish air force, proved to have a superb hull-form, says Dornier, a form that allowed it to land and take off in very rough seas. This technology has not improved since the war — so Dornier engineers have retained the hull in a new, experimental model (the Do 24 TT, below). But they have provided a much more efficient (supercritical) wing, benefiting from modern aerodynamics. The target market is island transport, where helicopters are now much used, or long-range offshore patrol, policing and rescue.