

European molecular biology

Laboratory awaits British decision

Heidelberg

THE European Molecular Biology Laboratory, still awaiting to see whether the British Medical Research Council (MRC) will continue its membership, now expects next week's council meeting to pass off without a final decision. The expectation is that the British delegation will abstain (as it did last year) in voting on the budget for 1984, and that a final decision on continued British membership will not be known until after a meeting of MRC in December.

The issue is nevertheless crucial for the future of the laboratory, not merely because of the size of the British contribution (14.7 per cent of the total this year but destined to rise to 16.7 per cent next year) but because of the possibility that other members might follow a British lead in pulling out. (The Netherlands is thought to be an unsure member, for example.)

British reconsideration of its membership stems from a sentence in last year's report of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils which recommends that the question should be raised. Since then, MRC has told the governing council what is afoot, has appointed a review group to make recommendations (thought to be favourable) on future membership, but still has to receive opinions from its internal committees, its Cell Board in particular.

Dr Lennart Philipson, the Swedish director-general of the laboratory for the past two years, is in the circumstances as much occupied with nail-biting over administration as with the scientific programme. The laboratory is vulnerable to the criticism of its members because of its relatively high cost, but Philipson insists that it cannot be accused of extravagance in its running expenses, costing no more than comparable laboratories elsewhere (and likely to cost less in future, with the introduction of a new system for controlling consumable expenses at the beginning of 1984). The salaries of staff members are the chief bugbear, having originally been modelled on those enjoyed at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), but Philipson also argues that it is appropriate that people on short-term contracts should be compensated for the inevitable insecurity of their positions as well as for the laboratory's denial of outside consultancies.

Conditions of employment at the laboratory seem to be a constant headache. The total staff complement has been fixed at 255 (including 120 working scientists), leaving only five vacancies as things are. At any time, the scientific population may be half as much again because of visitors on "soft" money. The issue of tenure remains a problem. The council has accepted the principle of rolling tenure (on a three or five year basis) but has also set up a com-

mittee to decide how many posts should qualify under this heading. Meanwhile, visiting postdoctoral fellows are unhappy with a scheme for equalizing stipends now that the fall of the deutchemark relative to the US dollar requires "levelling down" and not the opposite.

Philipson's difficulty in these circumstances is that of attracting able groups of people. But many of the laboratory's member countries insist that its proper role should in any case be to provide a place at which their nationals can acquire skills which are then transferred back again. The snag is that such a recipe cannot work if everybody is a short-term visitor.

Philipson's chief initiative so far has been to import (from the Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum) a team concerned with differentiation in haematopoiesis under Dr Thomas Graf, now established at the laboratory with a staff of twenty and a dozen doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows. Attempts to repeat this pattern by recruiting people skilled at the manipulation of yeast genes have so far been unsuccessful, chiefly because potential can-

didates have usually been offered better jobs in their own institutions. But the search continues.

For the rest, the laboratory is finding the management of its DNA sequence bank more difficult than expected. Like other centres (such as Los Alamos, in the United States) it appears to have found that the mechanical task of storing the data now being published is relatively straightforward, and that the intellectual difficulty lies in writing computer programs intelligent enough to answer the kinds of questions potential users have at the backs of their minds. This section of the laboratory is likely to grow, as is that concerned with the amino acid sequencing of femtomole quantities of proteins.

What happens if the British eventually say no remains to be seen. Philipson points out that the British contribution to the laboratory is less than the total payment (by way of salaries and allowances) to British nationals, but this is unlikely to carry much weight with the British Treasury or the Medical Research Council. In any case, the laboratory disdains the operation of a national quota system, and is free to appoint people of any nationality to its staff, scientific and otherwise.

John Maddox

Soviet science awards

A long time coming

THIS year's Soviet State Prizes, according to Academician Anatolli P. Aleksandrov, president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and head of the Council of Ministers' Committee for Lenin and State prizes in Science and Technology, were awarded on the criterion of contributing to the technological and industrial progress of the country. That science should so contribute has been a major theme in Soviet planning during the past two decades, but this is the first time that the relation between prizes and production has been stated so clearly. Commenting on the awards in *Pravda*, Aleksandrov said that at a time when "the threat to peace is growing" and "attempts are being made" to slow down the "progress" of the Soviet Union by forcing it to divert resources from the national economy to defence, it has become vitally important that Soviet industry and technology should be made more effective and productive.

Since there is a notorious timelag between new discoveries and their implementation this criterion has meant that fourteen out of the seventeen prizes in the science section went to large teams (often from several different institutions) for work carried out over a long period of time. Several prizes go to such "cycles of works" originating from the 1960s, one goes back to 1954 and one — for the wave-dynamics of gas-liquid systems — covers thirty years (1952–82). The only three research projects not dated in this way deal with the autogeneration of a light-wave

front in conditions of forced scatter on ultrasound, a study of the human chromosome in normal and pathological conditions and research into amyloidosis. A study of mobile genes which won a state prize for Georgii P. Georgiev and nine collaborators is dated "1972–81", starting two years before the big Soviet drive in molecular biology was launched.

The same emphasis on long-term work is evident in the prizes for textbooks. All four works honoured were revised editions, including a ninth edition of Ivan M. Vinogradov's *Principles of Number Theory* for universities and a 14th edition of N. A. Maksimov's *Physical Geography* for fifthgrade school-children.

The 27 prizes in the "technology" division, however, concentrated on new technologies — pride of place going to Anfiya A. Baulina and her team whose new process for producing chromium compounds has brought in bulk orders from more than 30 countries. The borderline between "science", "technology" and "textbooks" seems blurred. This year the technology section includes two awards for innovations which serve not industry but research — "the development of photographic materials for astronomy, spectroscopy and the diagnostics of thermonuclear laser plasma" and "the development and production of marked tritium compounds for physicochemical biology and biotechnology".

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