

Merger mooted in UK research

London

THE division of responsibilities for research and training in the biological sciences in Britain at present shared by four research councils, is to be reviewed following assertions from three of the councils that the system is unsatisfactory. Essentially, the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) wants to merge with the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC), which in turn favours a single non-medical biological sciences research council. The Medical Research Council says the biology activities of the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) would be more sensibly placed with the three 'mission oriented' councils. The discussion has been conducted mainly before a House of Lords committee investigating the state of agriculture and food research in Britain.

Last week, in its evidence to the committee, the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) announced that it is to set up a committee under Mr Richard Morris, the board's deputy chairman, to "review the disposition between research councils of responsibilities for research and training in the biological sciences and present arrangements for coordination" and "to recommend any changes . . . that are needed to improve efficiency and effectiveness".

On the question of its own role, ABRC chairman Sir David Phillips remains adamant that the board should not be given executive powers, but that it does have a wider role to play in the government's decision-making machinery. In particular, Phillips is "concerned" that his board should have closer links with the new Advisory Council on Science and Technology, notwithstanding the fact that he serves on both bodies.

On agriculture and food research, the board warns in its written submission to the committee that constraints on the science budget will result in AFRC being forced to reduce or completely eliminate some 20 high priority research programmes. Other important projects will remain consigned to the drawing board.

On commissioned research, the board is becoming "increasingly concerned by the significant reductions in research commissions from government departments, sometimes at relatively short notice". Effective forward planning by the research councils (principally NERC and AFRC) is "seriously undermined" and the financial and other costs of continual restructuring are a sizeable burden. The viability of research programmes part-funded from commissions and part from the science budget is put in question, the board says.

Simon Hadlington

Norwegian heavy water makes waves to the east

London

RELATIONS between Hungary and Romania, already tense over the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, worsened last week with reports in Hungarian newspapers that Romania has exported to Israel heavy water originally bought from Norway. But the issue seems to be a case of misdirected fire.

The Romanian denial, carried by the official press agency Agerpress, called the Hungarian reports "a violation of the elementary rules" of the media which "disinforms" the Hungarian and international public. What Romania overlooked was that the Hungarian reports echoed these already circulating in the Western press.

The first reference seems to have been by Professor Gary Milhollin, from the University of Wisconsin and a former consultant for the US Department of Defense, who described, in an article in *Le Monde*, Norway's unsuccessful efforts to inspect 20 tonnes of heavy water sold to Israel in 1959. He said that Israel had refused Norway access to its Dimona plant, but had said 8 tonnes of heavy water has been used up. He then noted that the 12 tonnes "they offer to show the inspectors" correspond "curiously enough" to the 12.5 tonnes sold by Norway to Romania in 1986. Milhollin was frankly speculating.

On 19 May, the Norwegian foreign ministry nevertheless announced an enquiry to find out whether Romania had indeed disposed of the heavy water, whose resale was forbidden without Oslo's consent. The heavy water was supplied to equip the Canadian-designed

Candu reactor on which construction began at Cernovoda in 1979. Of eastern European states, Romania alone has diplomatic relations with Israel.

By the time the Hungarian press took up the story on 24 May, Norway had demanded to know the location of the heavy water it had supplied. Two days later, a Romanian official in London said that the Cernovoda reactor (the first of five) was being filled with heavy water. Although Romanian officials claim that the reactor will be commissioned next year, the resident Canadian engineering manager, John Karger, says that even 1992 is a "very optimistic" date. Norway appears not to have known, when it sold the heavy water, that the Cernovoda plant was so far behind schedule.

Norway is already in difficulties over heavy water. Apart from the dispute with Israel over inspection of Dimona, it had to announce earlier this year that 15 tonnes of heavy water shipped to Frankfurt in 1983 had "gone missing".

Some Romanian sources suggest that the Romanian heavy water may have been sold to Israel to raise hard currency, and in the expectation that it would be replaced, by the time Cernovoda is commissioned, from the output of a small heavy-water plant at Turinu Sereniu.

Expert examination of the heavy water could provide an answer. The International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, saying that it has no statutory powers to inspect heavy water in Romania, says that it nevertheless has the necessary instruments.

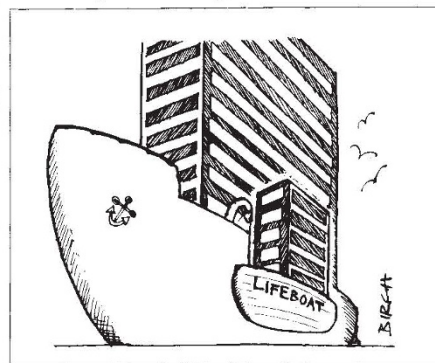
Vera Rich

Floating real estate in Tokyo Bay

Tokyo

LAND here can cost \$200,000 a square metre, so some bizarre ideas can make economic sense. Thus an Osaka company plans to build a small high-technology city centre on a 35,000-ton ship to be moored in Tokyo Bay. The influx of foreign securities firms and banks to Tokyo has so increased demand for office space that already astronomical land prices have been driven to even greater heights. Last month, the National Land Agency valued the Tokyo area's total land assets at 587 million million yen (\$4.7 billion), about twice the gross national product of Japan.

The Noah Project, to float a city sub-centre in the bay, was conceived by Temporary Center, an Osaka manpower firm, and is expected to be joined by Ishikawajima-Harima Heavy Industries and other shipbuilding companies. The ship will have office space for 700 people, a hotel accommodating 150 and a concert hall, and will



be equipped with advanced computer and satellite telecommunications facilities. A shuttle launch service will connect with the Tokyo waterfront.

Supporters of the scheme also point out that the ship would be safe from earthquakes and that, if a tsunami warning is issued, the "floating city" could head for the open sea.

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