

A new vision of unity in standards and training

London

JEAN-PIERRE CONTZEN, the Belgian director-general of the Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), has a vision in which the nine research institutes under his wing will become an amalgam of a standard-setting organization and a means of training Europeans in new technology. Arguing that Europe has too few public research laboratories, his belief that the JRC has a future is infectious. But the future has not always been as certain.

In reality, JRC has only in the past five months emerged from the most serious threat to its existence — the plain discontent of several member states most openly expressed during the long haggle over the present Framework programme. The complaints were that the four laboratories (then distinct) were too costly, too large, badly managed and without function.

The outcome was a review process carried out by a panel under Dr Harry Becker, research director of the Royal Dutch Shell Oil Company, which began in July 1986, and whose chief recommendations were structural and managerial in character. Crucial among these was the decision that the research programme and the administration of JRC should be overseen by an independent board, whose first chairman is Sir John Kendrew, the British Nobel prizewinner.

Commitology

BRUSSELS is as prolific in the invention of committees as in that of acronyms, and even uses the word *commitology* to describe the theory and practice of committee creation — do committee members represent member states? Who nominates them? Which arm of the EEC reimburses members for travelling expenses? Are decisions by consensus? If a decision is reached by a simple majority, can the chairman break a tie?

This year, each of the nine institutes of the Joint Research Centre (this page) will be blessed with an advisory committee. Most of the Commission's research programmes have one of their own as well.

But in the Commission's administration of science and technology, the most powerful committees are CODEST (page 734), widely respected for its independence; CREST (representing national governments and advising on general strategy), commonly said to be too big to be workable, let alone manageable; and IRDAC (which stands for "Industrial Research and Development Committee"), which suffers from the same faults. □

Contzen, previously DGXII's planner (and thus the architect of the present Framework programme), is in the unusual position of having helped to review the organization he must now administer. Plainly there is some frustration that the legal procedures were completed only in November 1988 (the new plans had to be approved not merely by the Commission and the council, but by the parliament as well). But now, with relief, he says that the new organization is in place.

The most obvious change is verbal: the Commission used to operate four Joint Research Centres, at Karlsruhe (West Germany), Geel (Belgium), Patten (the Netherlands) and Ispra (in the foothills of the Italian Alps), but now there is just the Joint Research Centre, in the singular. The three northern laboratories have been renamed as institutes (but Petten, now called the Institute for Advanced Materials, has a kind of outstation at Ispra); as yet, their research programmes are little changed.

Ispra, always the worry, has seen the most upheaval. Its research programme has been divided into five parts, each of which is renamed as a separate institute. Ispra also becomes the location of the unit intended to provide the rest of the organization with research support, principally in computing.

Part of Contzen's immediate problem is psychological: how to give the 2,180 members of his staff the ideal blend of institutional loyalty and corporate 'solidarity'? The calculation is that the identification of separate institutes dealing with different parts of the research programme is a necessary means of making the separate functions pointed and of making sure that people know what they are about. But there is also a long-term need that people should move more freely than in the past from one programme to another.

Inflexibility is the most obvious difficulty. The Community's procedures are an encumbrance: line-by-line approval and scrutiny of the budget is routine, which means that there is little scope for transferring resources from one project to another as new opportunities arise.

The immobility of the staff is another impediment. Only about 3 per cent move to posts outside JRC each year. What Contzen hopes is that the future pattern of employment may change that. New appointments are now routinely made on a five-year contract, which may be renewed for a second five-year period, but not thereafter; either the person concerned is then appointed for an indefinite period, or he or she must leave.

More than half (53 per cent) are already

employed on short-term contracts such as these. It is now also planned that there should be a system of three-year appointments that will be strictly non-renewable. The first ten posts have been advertised, but Contzen hopes there will be 150 of them in four years. He regards them not merely as a means of recruiting specialists for urgent tasks, but also as a kind of industrial postdoctoral fellowship that may be an innovation in its own right.

JRC also plans to foster its more familiar fellowship schemes (there were 11 graduate students and 24 postdoctoral fellows on the books last year) and to attract more senior people from elsewhere for periods of up to a year. (There were 58 of these sabbatical fellows in 1988.)

Contzen has undertaken that in the next four years, the annual turnover of staff at JRC will increase from 3 per cent to between 5 and 10 per cent a year. A plan to terminate the appointments of 100 staff members will help, but is bound to be a bone of contention in the council of ministers, which has been severely critical of the generosity of previous early retirement schemes.

Salaries at JRC (and at other Commission establishments, such as JET) have always been a contentious issue, partly because they must of necessity be greater than those paid in the EEC's most prosperous member states, partly because they are tax-free. The other side of that coin is that the language and cultural barriers within Europe are still so great that the education of JRC employees' children is likely to be interrupted, as will be their spouses' careers.

The quota system is another stifling influence on JRC. Broadly speaking, the nationality of the professionals on JRC's staff must reflect the size of member states. It is not so much that governments have been anxious to secure for their own nationals posts in a well-paying organization (although there is some of that); others are or have been alarmed that JRC might suck away important parts of their skilled labour force.

The Commission (which is ambivalent on the issue) offers in defence of the system the reflection that it helps to diffuse JRC's work through the Community. But quotas are an irksome impediment to good management; Contzen wishes they would go away. The question of whether there would be quotas (and on what basis) in a united Europe seems not to have been considered.

Despite the impediments, the pattern of research is likely to change more quickly now than in the past. One administrative innovation is the decision that roughly 5 per cent of JRC's resources should be spent on the exploration of new projects.

Under this rubric, in 1988 JRC embarked on investigations of the use of ultrasound (21 kHz) for removing aro-