

Canada plans to give unified voice to science

David Dickson

Canada is planning to establish a single national science organization, designed to generate and coordinate scientific advice to the federal government and to provide a voice for Canadian science in national and international debates.

Draft proposals for such a body — to be known as the Canadian Academies, and based on models such as the US National Academies complex — are now being published on the . by a working party set up by the federal government last year.

The working party describes the establishment, which would be run as a non-profit charitable organization with its own president and full-time staff, as an “imperative” for the country, given the growing social and political importance of scientific issues.

Its members would include the country’s three main existing organizations for science, engineering and health: the Canadian Academy of the Sciences and Humanities (otherwise known as the Royal Society of Canada), the Canadian Academy of Engineering, and the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences, which is to be established later this year.

One enthusiastic proponent is the chair of the working party, Gilbert Normand, Secretary of State for Science Research and Development. “The Canadian government has a large number of separate advisory committees, but it does not have an independent, national organization that has the confidence both of the Canadian people and of the international scientific community,” he says.

According to Normand, one of the main tasks of the new body will be to provide a source of “credible, independent expert assessments on the sciences underlying important issues and matters of public interest”. To carry out these assessments, the body will use either its own money or funding from the government or other sources.

The working group, which includes Michel Chrétien, director of the Regional Protein Chemistry Centre at the Ottawa Health Research Institute and brother of Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, has planned in detail how the new body might operate.

One suggestion is that, as well as members selected by each of the participating organizations, its board of governors would include six members appointed from the public.

Normand says that, providing that there is general public support for the plans — which have met no opposition so far — he intends to propose the creation of the Canadian Academies to the cabinet “sometime in the autumn”, and that “perhaps there will be some money allocated in the next budget”.

Running costs are estimated to be Can\$3 million a year. Normand says that, although the government might decide to provide this



All for one: Canada’s parliament stands to benefit from scientific advice given by the proposed body.

money on an annual basis, his preferred option would be to set up the organization with an initial capital allocation from the government of Can\$30 million, which would allow it to be stable for ten years of operation and would help to nurture its independence.

Another keen supporter of the project is Tom Brzustowski, president of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council

of Canada, who says that the idea first came to him after the World Conference on Science in Budapest in June–July 1999.

Shortly after the conference, Brzustowski wrote in the research council’s newsletter that he felt that Canada lacked the institutional capacity to deal with the “big issues” involving science and society. ■

► <http://www.nrc.ca/indcan/nso>

Commission plots transgenic future

Peter Pockley, Sydney

An extensive study by a royal commission has opened the door for New Zealand to cautiously embrace genetically modified (GM) agriculture for the first time.

The findings of the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification in New Zealand were welcomed by many scientists. But they angered the country’s Green Party, whose considerable political influence led to the commission being established.

Peter Gluckman, dean of medicine at the University of Auckland, says the report is “very sensible in that it rejected outright the concept of a genetic-engineering-free New Zealand as incompatible with the modern world and the nation’s future”.

The commission’s 1,200-page report, released on 30 July, says that transgenic agriculture should be introduced to New Zealand “selectively with appropriate care”. It recommends loosening existing controls on field trials of GM crops, and creating new mechanisms for controlling their commercial release. No GM crops have yet been released for commercial sale in New Zealand.

But the commission says that genetic modification should be banned in certain circumstances where its introduction

might threaten growers’ interests.

It also suggests that decisions on the first commercial release of GM crops should be shifted from the Environmental Risk Management Authority to the environment minister. A parliamentary commissioner on biotechnology would be given powers to investigate issues, independently of the government, to produce accessible reports for the public and to advise parliament on genetic-engineering policies.

The royal commission was established by the Labour–Alliance government 15 months ago (see *Nature* 404, 914; 2000). It is made up of four commissioners — a retired judge, a biomedical researcher, a medical practitioner of Maori heritage and an Anglican bishop.

The government is not bound by the commission’s recommendations, but the prime minister, Helen Clark, and the environment minister, Marian Hobbs, welcomed the commission as “the most wide-ranging inquiry into genetic modification ever undertaken in any country”. They set a deadline of 31 October for announcing the government’s plans to enact its recommendations. ■

► www.gmcommission.govt.nz