

between some British research and industry, but it is a coercive as well as a democratic process. If it goes badly wrong, it could finish off research in Britain — except perhaps in particle physics and astronomy. □

Modest growth for NIH

Congress's conference on the budget for the US National Institutes of Health has agreed on a 6 per cent rise.

FOR more than two decades, the White House (both Republican and Democratic) has consistently proposed budgets for the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) that it well knew were below what the Congress would eventually agree to spend. It was a silly game, but allowed members of Congress to look good in their home districts, where they could boast that they had voted to increase funding for vital (and politically popular) biomedical research. But this year it looked as if the game was up. The administration's budget request would have meant that most NIH institutes and divisions would have less to spend in real dollars.

Now, the conference of the two NIH appropriations committees has agreed to let NIH have an overall increase of some \$600 million, for a total budget close to \$10.9 billion — roughly 6 per cent above the final figure for the year just ended. In addition, it seems, both NIH committees have agreed not to repeat last year's fiasco in which earmarking funds to meet the demands of special interest groups played havoc with the budget process; feminist lobbyists managed to get \$210 million for breast cancer research added to the budget of the Department of Defense and a small biotechnology company's lobbyist won a trial of an AIDS vaccine that could not compete successfully in the peer review process. Let us hope that agreement sticks.

But will the 6 per cent suffice? The increase will not be met by jubilation in the US biomedical community and its professional organizations, which are forever telling the Congress of the virtues of research. Compared with past increases of 15 per cent or more, it does indeed seem meagre. Indeed, in a \$10-plus billion enterprise, \$600 million does look a little like petty cash. But these may be exceptional times. Bent on reducing the federal deficit, Congress has frozen discretionary spending (of which all scientific research is a part) for the next five years. So an increase for one agency must be at the expense of competing and often equally worthy causes.

Even so, this year may be the last in which biomedical research enjoys any special consideration. What will happen then? NIH (and its new director, Harold Varmus) should turn immediate attention to winning greater value from its budget. A review of the balance between intramural and extramural research is overdue. Then the peer-review system, which now ranks more than 20,000 grant applications a year, needs overhauling. But all steps in those directions will hurt not only researchers but also their institutions. Will Varmus become a super-lobbyist, not only in the Congress but in the board rooms of the biomedical corporations? □

Thatcher's tale

This year's most celebrated political autobiography seems not to be recognizable as history of science.

MRS Margaret (now Lady) Thatcher is the best-known of Britain's prime ministers since Sir Winston Churchill, and was the first to be qualified as a scientist. Even though she was forced out of office three years ago, she remains a powerful influence in British politics. Her declaration to a radio audience on Monday that her successor, Mr John Major, now deserves support because of his supposed recent conversion to "traditional values" may even help him in the public opinion polls. The broadcast was itself a contribution to the campaign to sell copies of her book called *The Downing Street Years* (HarperCollins, London; £25.00).

Inevitably, the chief interest of this work is the author's account of her often tempestuous relations with her colleagues, many of them still in politics. Touchingly, her personal stationery carrying a dedication (to husband, family and ex-helpers) now reproduced shows that, in her mind, her fellowship of the Royal Society still ranks alongside her Order of Merit and membership of the Privy Council, but researchers will search in vain for an explanation of why they and their institutions were dealt with so shabbily during her regime. Indeed, the author's only substantial account of an intervention in scientific affairs is of the circumstances leading to her endorsement of the view that global warming is potentially a threat to the global environment.

Surprisingly, Thatcher explains that her conversion to this cause derives from her recognition, some time before 1987, that too much public support was directed towards defence science, and too much towards "the development of products for the market rather than to pure science". She adds that "as someone with a scientific background, I knew that the greatest economic benefits had always resulted from advances in fundamental knowledge rather than the search for specific applications". She puts the case for basic research vividly: "transistors were not discovered by the entertainment industry seeking new ways of marketing pop music, but rather by people working on wave mechanics and solid-state physics". But these opinions do not accord with the recollections of those in basic research around 1987, nor, interestingly, with her successors' devotion to wealth creation.

For science as in many other ways, Thatcher is a greater disappointment with hindsight than she appeared at the time. Intelligent, energetic and determined, she might have done for British science what President François Mitterrand did for France about the same time. And if basic research is as valuable as she now says she knew it to be, why did she tolerate so much beastliness in her government's handling of research? Was not that the time when British academic institutions were under the most severe pressure or, as she now puts it, "by exerting financial pressure we had increased administrative efficiency and provoked overdue rationalisation"? Even in this peripheral neck of Thatcher's woods, the history is hardly recognizable in the text. □