Japan's Diet eyes technology assessment

Tokyo. A committee with broad powers to analyse government science policy and provide advice to lawmakers on science and technology is to be set up in Japan if a bill to be put before the Diet, Japan's Parliament, early next year is approved.

The bill has been proposed by Taro Nakayama of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The proposed committee — tentatively called the Science and Technology Assessment Committee — would be made up of 15 Diet members from all political parties, each of whom would serve a three-year term, supported by an office staffed by an estimated 105 researchers.

This office is expected to have a budget and management structure modelled on that of the US Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) which, ironically, was abolished by Congress earlier this year after 22 years (see *Nature* 376, 541; 1995).

Nakayama's proposal comes at a time when mounting political support for science and technology, spurred by continuing recession and fears that Japan may be left behind in key areas, has already resulted in a flurry of new legislation and other measures designed to bolster the country's position in high technology.

Nakayama himself is a qualified medical doctor and a former diplomat. He proposed the new bill as a representative of the Diet's Science, Technology and Policy Committee. He and others say the new assessment committee is needed because of the increasing scale and complexity of government-supported science projects, and the lack of a body capable of assessing their benefits and effectively coordinating the expenditure of public funds on research and development.

Nakayama, for example, wanted to cut funding for Japan's nuclear-powered ship *Mutsu*, which consumed more than a billion dollars of taxpayers' money over nearly two decades yet spent only a few days at sea. But there was no adequate mechanism for the Diet to cut off funding, while the Science

and Technology Agency continued to pour money into the project as it did not want to lose the budget.

Details of the proposed committee's priorities have not been made public. But areas within its remit are expected to include the nation's space and faster breeder reactor programmes which some believe have not been adequately assessed.

According to one of his political colleagues, Nakayama feels that Japan is wasting a lot of money on the H-2 rocket, which costs twice as much as launch vehicles elsewhere. He thinks Japan should consider using cheaper Chinese or Russian rockets to launch Japanese satellites.

The latest proposal follows last month's approval of a law on basic science and technology passed by the Diet in the belief that the government should do more to support basic research, particularly that which may sow the seeds of future industrial technologies in areas such as materials and biotechnology (see *Nature*, 378, 227; 1995).

Nakayama originally wanted to pass both the basic science law and the present bill as a package, and is said to have been extremely angry when the basic science law was passed first. Both this law and the latest proposal originated as private members' bills drafted by members of the LDP, some of whose younger members in particular appears to be keen supporters of science and technology (see *Nature* 378, 8; 1995).

The main body responsible for providing the Japanese cabinet with advice on science and technology at present is the Science and Technology Council. This is a mixture of academics and politicians, and includes the ministers from all government departments and agencies responsible for supporting science, chaired by the prime minister.

But although the membership of these ministers and the prime minister lends the group an apparent authority, many inside and outside the government feel the council is not as influential as its prestige suggests.

Stephen Barker

UK geophysicist killed in San Diego

San Diego. Keith Runcorn, a British geophysicist who was widely known for his work on continental drift, was strangled in his hotel room in San Diego, California, last week while on a lecture tour. San Diego police have made no arrests in the murder of Runcorn, who held an endowed chair at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

In the 1950s, Runcorn was an early proponent of the theory that continents slowly drift apart, gradually altering the map of the world. Plate tectonics, as the theory became known, revolutionized geology, spurring him and other geophysicists to debate for decades the merits of the concept.

Runcorn later worked with Patrick (later Lord) Blackett at the University of Manchester, before returning to the University of Cambridge. He also carried out research

on remnant magnetism, at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

A scientist who thrived on controversy, the red-haired Englishman was a member of the committee that monitored Biosphere 2, the experimental habitat near Tucson, Arizona, that doubles up as both a research project and a tourist attraction. He was meeting academic colleagues in San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco on the trip when he was killed.

Runcorn was staying in downtown San Diego, in a hotel which is surrounded by new office towers and plush hotels with stunning views of San Diego Bay. According to police, he had checked into the older, refurbished hotel in order to save money and be near restaurants and shops, and had planned to stay there a week.

Police said he had a blunt-trauma wound to the head, and had also been strangled. Runcorn's room was partially ransacked, and he is thought to have been dead for a number of hours before being found.

The neighbourhood is not known for serious crime, and tourists walk the area at all hours. Murders of such prominent individuals are rare in San Diego, where most killings are related to gangs or the drug trade the flourishes near the border with Mexico.

Rex Dalton

Runcorn: thrived on scientific controversy.

► problems of all the new *Länder*.

Manfred Erhardt, the city's research minister, told the meeting that the WIP programme should be extended to buy more time to achieve the original intention of genuinely integrating the scientists into universities. The University Rectors' Conference (HRK) supports this position, but has no direct say in decision-making.

Some new money earmarked for east German researchers, including WIP scientists, could be made available if plans come to fruition for a third *Hochschulsonderprogramm*, a trouble-shooting programme aimed at solving particular university-related problems, such as the low representation of women in academic institutions.

In principle, all sides agree that such a

programme is needed, particularly to help iron out inequalities between east and west Germany. But at its meeting this week, the BLK was unable to decide how much money the programme should have, and how the bill should be split between federal and *Länder* governments. It therefore delayed a decision until next March.

The federal government would like the total cost to be DM3.6 billion and wants the *Länder* to pay 60 per cent, but the *Länder* would like a total of DM4.1 billion, split 50:50. Moreover, the federal government argued that the final decision will depend on the outcome of other contentious issues, such as how much money it will have to spend on student grants and university buildings.

Alison Abbott