

Republican platform promises support for biomedical research

Washington. The Republican platform adopted by the party's convention in San Diego last week, called for "private sector funding for applied research," saying that federal science programmes should emphasize basic research. It also promises to "make space travel and space science a national priority".

The document — which Bob Dole, the Republican presidential nominee, says he hasn't read, although it is supposed to guide voters on the priorities of a Dole administration — pledges to abolish the Department of Energy (DoE). It would put the weapons laboratories in "an independent agency under the Department of Defense," and farm out other DoE programmes to other departments and offices.

The platform promises "support for generous funding of medical research", and calls for "fetal protection" in biomedical research. (In 1993, the Democratic Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed a bill reversing a Reagan-era ban on use of fetal tissue from induced abortions in government-funded research.) □

Japanese climate study satellite

Tokyo. Japan's space agency NASDA last weekend launched its biggest satellite, ADEOS (Advanced Earth Observation Satellite), a platform designed to measure the reduction of the stratospheric ozone layer, and gather information on global warming and climate change. The US\$1.2 billion mission, which was carried out in collaboration with the United States and France, also represents the fourth successful launch of Japan's H-2 rocket. ADEOS is scheduled to operate for two years and to be replaced in 1999 by ADEOS-2. □

German information autobahn

Munich. Germany is to spend DM1.9 billion (US\$1.27 billion) over the next four years upgrading its information and multimedia infrastructure. German participation in electronic publication and global digital libraries are the main goals, according to Jürgen Rüttgers, the research minister. He promises scientists and engineers full desktop access to all available electronic information worldwide by 2000.

Under the programme, a consortium of scientific societies, publishing houses, universities, companies and private users will cooperate with international partners. But the private sector should support information networks and services once the infrastructure is established, says Rüttgers. □

UK pupils flee science

London. The numbers of pupils taking science subjects at Advanced Level continue to decline, according to the results of A-level examinations published last week. The numbers taking humanities subjects remain stable, while those sitting newer and less traditional subjects recorded significant increases

But the standard of overall performance of the examinations that are taken at the age of 18 registered a sharp rise. This year's pass rate was 85.8 per cent, compared to 84 per cent last year.

Sixteen per cent fewer candidates sat for A-level biology compared to the previous year, 5.65 per cent fewer candidates enrolled for physics and 4.3 per cent fewer for chemistry. Economics also experienced a 7.6 per cent dip in candidates.

Subjects that witnessed an increase include sport/physical education studies (26.6 per cent), media/film/television studies (25 per cent), general studies (10 per cent), business studies (8.4 per cent) and psychology (8 per cent).

The numbers taking mathematics, however, rose by 8.4 per

cent. But this is in part being attributed to the introduction of 'modular' courses, where pupils are examined on specific parts of the syllabus at regular intervals throughout the course, instead of taking one, comprehensive final examination at the end of the two years. □

Pulsar prize

New Delhi. Antony Hewish, a British astronomer, will later this year receive the Indian National Science Academy's Vainu Bappu memorial award, an annual prize named after the late Manali Vainu Bappu, a fellow of the academy and founder of modern astronomy in India. Hewish won the 1974 Nobel prize for physics, along with Jocelyn Bell Bunnell, for his discovery of pulsars. □

US student murders academics

San Diego. A mechanical engineering student at San Diego State University pulled a gun during the defence of his master's thesis last week and shot to death the three professors on his review panel. The three were Chen Liang, Constantinos Lyrantzis and D. Preston Lowry, who was to have become chairman of the Department of Mechanical Engineering next month.

The alleged killer, Frederick Martin Davidson, described as a 36-year-old loner, was arrested shortly after the shooting and charged with three counts of murder. Davidson's thesis had been rejected once before. The killings have left the university community in a state of shock. □

Students 'bought' degrees'

Cape Town. Claims that students may have been buying degrees from the University of Zululand, in Kwazulu-Natal, for the past 20 years have led the university council's executive committee to call on education minister Sibusiso Bengu for a government inquiry. An internal inquiry launched by the university following allegations by a student is scheduled to report next month.

A senior administrator at the university, Alson Ngubane, was suspended last week, while 15 students alleged to have obtained degrees fraudulently were barred from graduating. Ngubane claims he is a "sacrificial lamb" and that at least 20 officials and academics were involved. If the extent of the fraud is confirmed, many graduates in senior positions may be found to have bogus qualifications. □

Spanish science head urges caution

Barcelona. César Nombela (pictured), the newly appointed president of CSIC, Spain's central research organization, says he refuses to "dismember" the organization by ceding its research institutes to autonomous regions. Catalonia had demanded such action before the spring general elections.

"We will keep open discussions, but the most we are planning to do is to strengthen our collaboration with local governments, and perhaps open new institutes in the regions where we are not yet present," he says.

Nombela also says he will consider very carefully a proposal by the central government to transfer all government research institutes to CSIC. In May, the government said this should happen within six months, but it backed down following protests from scientists, who argued that research at many of the institutes, including cartography and water management agencies, was not front line and would not fit into CSIC's portfolio. The government has now set up a committee, headed by Nombela, to assess the consequences of merger. □

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