

## BIOCHEMICAL MEETING

**All Change**

THE unruly students of Italy's universities and the University of Rome in particular will no doubt be more than a little amused by the latest outcome of their frequent rebellions. Their activities will oblige many of the world's most eminent biochemists to spend a week next year hopping on and off commuter transport between Lucerne, Interlaken and Montreux. By all accounts, because of the proclivity of Rome's students to sit-down strikes, seizure of their university buildings and tear gas and water cannon tussles with the local police, the city of Rome and its police force told the organizers of the Eighth International Congress of Biochemistry that the personal safety of all the many thousands of biochemists likely to turn up for an international junket could not be guaranteed. As a result the meeting's organizers, after touting around, have decided to hold their meeting at the three Swiss centres from September 3-9 next year. Once the demand for places at the ten different symposia has been assessed, the organizers will apparently decide the venue for each. Anyone wanting to go to symposia in different towns will simply have to commute.

To lay all this at the door of Italy's university students may, however, be to credit them with too much influence. It is alleged that Rome was not in any case proving to be the ideal place for the meeting anyway for a whole series of organizational reasons.

Moreover, some biochemists are saying that the Italian Government had had second thoughts about underwriting the cost of the conference, and that it wishes to devote all its energies and funds to putting the Italian universities in order. To act as host to an international meeting on the scale of the International Biochemical Congresses would be nothing but an unwanted distraction. But whatever the real reasons for the change in venue, and there are probably elements of truth in all those that are currently being gossiped about, the show will go on even if it does come to resemble a three ringed circus.

## ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

**Room to Breathe**

from our Astronomy Correspondent

THE restoration of the premises of the Royal Astronomical Society in the corner of Burlington House which was promised once the Royal Society had moved out to more fashionable Carlton House Terrace is at last taking place. Afficionados of the RAS meetings will no longer have to endure the narrow wooden benches of the society's lecture room, more appropriate to Dotheboy's Hall than a learned society with a Royal Charter, and the piercing draughts which seem to afflict the room on all but the hottest days. But one also hopes that the portraits of ciliated past presidents and other astronomical worthies which glower disconcertingly from the walls at near eye-level—at least for members of the audience on the rearmost benches of the stepped lecture room—will have an honourable place in the reconstruction.

The opportunity for expansion came after the move

of the Royal Society in 1967, which allowed more room for the plethora of societies which still inhabit Burlington House, a nineteenth century building encircling a courtyard off Piccadilly, and looking rather the worse for the sort of atmosphere which used to afflict Londoners until only quite recently. As it was, the need for more space has been pressing the Royal Astronomical Society for years. Although it must be gratifying for speakers to have a full house, even though a shifty, fidgety, uncomfortable one, there have often been members of the audience sitting on chairs brought into the aisles and blocking the doors to the extent of becoming almost a fire risk. Closed-circuit television with a monitor in the library upstairs has been tried—for the first time at a crowded meeting on pulsars in April last year—but could never be more than an emergency solution. What the society has been up against, it has been recognized, is what is called McNally's law, after one of the secretaries of the society, Dr D. McNally of the University of London Observatory. According to this, the attendance  $N$  follows the linear law  $N = 2.3(t - 1957) + 88$ , with probably a second order term of positive coefficient. Within a year or two, the lecture room would have been too small to accommodate even the average minimum attendance.

As a result of the redistribution of space in Burlington House, the old lecture room will be split into three to make a fellows' room and the extra office accommodation which the society badly needs. In future, the society will meet in a room across the courtyard by invitation of the British Academy, and a larger meeting room will be made available by the Ministry of Public Building and Works in nearby Savile Row. Space left in Burlington House by the Royal Society has been taken over by the Chemical Society, and in turn the Royal Astronomical Society has been allocated what used to be the library of the Chemical Society on the top floor of Burlington House overlooking Piccadilly. This is to be converted into a small lecture room to accommodate meetings of fewer than fifty people or so. The refurnishing also extends to a facelift for the council room, which ought to be finished by the end of the month. The society hopes that the rest of the alterations will be completed in time for its sesquicentenary next year.

## EUROPEAN SPACE

**French Cutback**

ALTHOUGH the expected large cut in the French contribution to ESRO brought about by the new wave of financial stringency in France will be a setback, the organization is probably in better shape to weather the storm than ever before in its eight year history. France, nevertheless, pays 20 per cent of the ESRO budget, and the expected cut of 30 million francs in a contribution of 50 million francs which is foreshadowed in the present proposals will be a serious blow. A reduced level of expenditure on the French national programme of space research also seems likely. What ESRO officials must be hoping is that by the time the contribution has to be paid, the financial situation in France will have eased. The second instalment is not due for almost a year, in August 1970, leaving plenty of time for a wait-and-see policy, and France should