

IN BRIEF

Japan's NPT difficulty

The Lower House of the Japanese Diet (Parliament) ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty last week, but a Japanese nuclear arms ban along treaty lines may still be some way off. Powerful right wing opposition in the Upper House, which must approve the Bill, could see the Bill abandoned when the present Parliamentary session ends on May 24, and there seems little chance that the ratification can remain "on the table" for the necessary 30 days for it automatically to become law, since the crucial decision to extend the session by six days also rests with the Upper House. Hawkish opposition has constantly delayed ratification since Japan signed the treaty six years ago, even though it has passed through the Lower House before.

Cancer Institute resignation

In a development which could prove very embarrassing to the US National Cancer Institute, a top official in charge of the institute's environmental carcinogenesis programmes resigned last week, charging that his department is starved of manpower and subsumed under layers of bureaucracy. The official, Dr Umberto Saffiotti, is an outspoken individual who has persistently taken strong stands on the need to remove suspected carcinogens from the environment. His resignation is likely to fuel the growing political debate about whether or not the war on cancer in the United States is paying sufficient attention to cancer prevention.

EEC environment research programme

A five-year research and development programme aimed at introducing better control over the environment and environmental pollution has been agreed by Ministers of the EEC Nine, and to get the £6.7 millions programme under way the Commission has asked for specific research projects from Community interests concerned with most aspects of environmental pollution, reclamation, and ecological problems raised by modern methods of land use. In most cases, successful applicants will share research costs with the community. Laboratories from two UK ministries — Environment, and Health and Social Security—are expected to submit applications.

THE Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology includes the major American professional societies of physiologists, biochemists, pharmacologists, pathologists, nutritionists and immunologists. This April, the annual Federation meeting was in Anaheim, California, a short walk from Disneyland. I now wish I had completed the project I thought of starting about ten years ago.

I noted then that registration at the meetings had climbed to more than 15,000, but there didn't appear to be any increase in attendance at many of the numerous scientific sessions. Some were packed, but other meeting rooms were almost empty. Where was everybody? Quite a few were at the exhibits, especially at the free Coca-Cola booth, but it seemed to me that thousands were unaccounted for. I resolved to make head counts systematically in the scientific sessions and compare them each year with the numbers registered, but I got diverted, and in any case, the Coca-Cola booth has been replaced by vending machines. I wondered about the effect of Disneyland this year as a counter-attraction to science, but I was too parsimonious to investigate the matter.

The meetings are a tribal ceremony with a rich folklore. A decent respect for my contemporaries, and a fear of reprisals, prevents me from describing the 1940 Federation meetings in New Orleans. There was a fine scientific programme, and in those lean days a front seat at the floor show in the lively Vieux Carré night clubs could be had for the price of a bottle of beer. Details may be furnished by the President of the National Academy

of Sciences, USA, if you can catch him in a reminiscent mood. He was there and it seemed to me that he didn't miss much.

After World War II, the societies grew so large that meetings were often held in the spacious accommodations at Atlantic City. Scientists

Federation meetings

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seemed more serious in those years, and diversions in Atlantic City in April are mostly unappealing. One event stands out. Convention Hall in Atlantic City is designed for major political conventions, at which a band plays on a stage in the main auditorium. The stage is skilfully constructed so that the chairman can press a button and the stage, with the band playing diminuendo, is gradually lowered into the basement by an elaborate system of electric motors

and reducing gears. The Candidate, Democrat or Republican, is then introduced to the ecstatic and partisan audience.

At the 1963 Federation meeting there was no band, of course. On stage was an eminent biochemist, Marianne Grunberg-Manago, to give an invited lecture on polynucleotide phosphorylase. Chairing the symposium was the urbane and famous Severo Ochoa, who graciously introduced Marianne. The first slide, showing how nucleoside diphosphates would form RNA-like polymers plus inorganic phosphate, came on the giant screen. The capacity audience was hushed and attentive. The chairman pressed a conveniently-placed button to dim the lights of the auditorium. Slowly and inexorably, platform, chairman, lectern and speaker descended out of sight.

Prominent scientific individualists of a type now unknown used to tread the boards at the meetings. Professor Barnett Sure had a strong dislike of the 15-minute time limitation imposed on regular papers. He would go on talking through the various warning lights and buzzers, through the discussion period, until he found the session chairman tugging at his sleeve. He would then glare at the chairman and say "First slide, please!" Many slides followed.

The American Society of Biological Chemists in 1976 decided to avoid the Federation Meetings, and are meeting separately, in June, at San Francisco, thus rejecting Mickey Mouse in favour of the adult entertainment for which San Francisco is famous. Watch for the report in *Nature*.