

US Environmental Protection Agency

Another hit-list and more embarrassment

Washington

THE resignation of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator Mrs Anne Burford has hardly put an end to the agency's troubles (see *Nature* 10 March, p.95). Last week, as half a dozen congressional panels continued their investigations of the agency, new evidence came to light of apparent political manipulation in staff appointments and agency actions.

First, the EPA official named in connection with the so-called "hit-list" of scientific advisers, Louis Cordia, was asked to resign amid charges that he had destroyed files being sought under a Freedom of Information Act request and his own admission that he had prepared a second "hit list" of agency employees.

This list, the first few pages of which were found in Cordia's files by congressional investigators, contains comments from Cordia's "close advisers" — apparently industry and conservative groups — on current and prospective EPA employees. Many are couched in ideological terms. Roy Albert of New York University, who serves on EPA's Carcinogen Assessment Group, is called "unacceptable to this Administration"; other comments include "philosophically attuned, professionally acceptable", "supportive of the new Administration if the new Administration is for nuclear power, business and conservative interests", and



"understood to have brought in many votes on 4 November", a reference to the date of the election.

The extent to which Cordia's comments were acted on is not clear. Congressional investigators are seeking the full 55-page document to find out. Cordia sent the document to Robert Perry, EPA's general counsel, and to William Sullivan, the former enforcement counsel, in July 1981, when he was on the staff of the conservative Heritage Foundation. Cordia had earlier served on the Reagan Administra-

tion's transition team for EPA, and subsequently served in EPA's Office of Federal Activities. A covering memo on the document, marked "From: Lou", asks Sullivan and Perry: "please do not share the recommendations + staff lists with anyone. I would feel the backlash".

Meanwhile, John Hernandez, now acting EPA administrator, is feeling the heat of the congressional investigation. Hernandez admitted last week that he had allowed Dow Chemical Company officials to read a draft report on dioxin contamination from its plant in Michigan and to suggest changes that deleted any reference to Dow's responsibility. While denying that he himself ordered the changes in the report, Hernandez admitted that he urged EPA staff members on several occasions to consider Dow's suggestions.

Congress is also continuing its investigation of other instances in which EPA of-

ficials may have favoured political considerations or private interests over the advice of their own scientists. One EPA staff member told congressional investigators of an "election-track" policy of speeding up announcements of selected hazardous waste-site clean-ups last year in time to help Republican candidates in the November congressional and gubernatorial races. And at least two former EPA officials, Rita Lavelle, who was assistant administrator for solid waste, and James Sanderson, a personal friend of Burford's who served as a high-level consultant to the agency, are being investigated for possible conflicts of interest between their EPA actions and their previous (in Lavelle's case) or current (in Sanderson's case) private employers.

The congressional investigations may yet turn up more damaging evidence. But they have already done considerable damage to the efforts of Reagan's appointees to substitute ideological expedience for what many observers say could have been a well-founded and scientifically-based policy of deregulation. The major results of these efforts have been political embarrassment, a paralysed EPA and the alienation of its employees and scientific advisers.

Stephen Budiansky

UK industrial research

Budget brings good tidings

THE Department of Industry did well out of the British Government's budget for 1983-84, made public recently in the House of Commons. The department, as foreshadowed in last month's public expenditure plans, will have substantially increased funds to spend on support for industrial research and development — an extra £185 million over three years. As yet, however, it has not modified its spending plans to accommodate the urgent criticisms made by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology.

Most of the new money will be spent as part of the department's scheme called "Support for Innovation" — a grant-making programme which can meet part of the cost of development projects mounted by industrial companies, and which has prompted an embarrassingly large number of applications since it was devised in May last year by the amalgamation of earlier industrial support schemes.

One new feature of the programme is that funds will now be available to help companies to bridge the gap between the successful completion of a development project and the point at which a new product or process can be exploited. A total of £40 million has been earmarked for such uses.

Under the terms of the Support for Innovation scheme, grants of up to 33½ per cent of the costs of approved research and development projects are offered to industrial companies. One of the most successful components of the scheme was

the Small Engineering Firms Investment Scheme, which helped small companies with grants for new capital equipment. That was closed ahead of schedule last year when the £30 million allocated to it had been fully committed: in 8½ weeks, 1,757 companies had applied for assistance. A new version of the scheme, which will probably be similar to the old one, is to be relaunched shortly with £100 million of new money.

Other schemes to be expanded provide support for development of telecommunications equipment, software products and computer-aided design and manufacture. In addition, increased support of £20 million will be allocated to various advisory services. A loan guarantee scheme will be extended with an increased lending ceiling.

There is as yet no indication that support for individual projects will be extended above the 33½ per cent level, or that the department will relax the rule that companies applying for support for a project must not have started work before applying, cited by the House of Lords committee as a cause of delay and thus of frustration. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether the department will heed the committee's complaint that to require applicant companies to prove that they would not undertake with their own resources the development projects for which they seek support is to ask them a Catch-22 question.

In other respects, the new support is likely to be welcomed by industry.

Tim Beardsley