

common budget after 1991. Then, unexpectedly, a committee of the Royal Society on public support for geophysics (see *Nature*, 27 June, p.709) has unexpectedly thrown up a series of questions about the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) which cannot be ignored until the council itself decides the time has come to answer them. What should ABRC say?

The Kendrew strategy is unhelpful for the simple reason that it will yield no budgetary relief when that is needed most, which is now. Even if savings of the order of 25 per cent are possible, which is improbable when CERN members such as Italy are eager to see high-energy physics in Europe expand, the first small relief for the British budget would come only in 1988. The difficulty into which the whole Kendrew exercise was boxed is that Britain is committed to the present scale of spending at CERN for at least the next three years by the undertakings given by the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) that there would be no backsliding while the new accelerator is being built, by similar undertakings to the international collaborations building detectors for the new instrument and by the implicit, but equally important, undertakings to graduate students whose careers are predicated on the completion of projects such as these. If Britain now follows Kendrew's advice, the course of events during the next two years is easily predicted. There will be a long wrangle at Geneva about future budgets, Britain will be blamed for rocking what has hitherto been a united enterprise, but in the end (if the strategy is kept to) will be forced to withdraw in humiliation. The political damage done will be no less than if it were decided to pull out of CERN immediately, moral obligations notwithstanding.

This dilemma is not of the research community's making, nor is it one that the community should on its own resolve. The difficulty has arisen because, while the British government refuses to recompense the research councils for the fall in the value of sterling except on an *ad hoc* basis, the CERN subscription (now £35 million a year) has become conspicuous. (No doubt it is only a matter of time before some other committee is appointed to enquire into the cost of the British contribution to the La Palma observatory, inaugurated only last weekend.) ABRC should now firmly throw this problem at the government, which did at the outset of the Kendrew inquiry say that it would have the final say on any proposal to withdraw from CERN. Now is the time for that. ABRC should warn the government of the political risks of pulling out, should explain that it cannot ask members of the scientific community to embark on a probably futile negotiation when the execution of the implied duress is beyond its own control, and meanwhile should insist that this and the other politically sensitive international subscriptions which are at present part of the science budget (such as the SERC subscription to the European Space Agency) are taken off the books of the research councils and handled centrally, by ABRC itself, with proper safeguards against currency fluctuations. Failing a satisfactory reply, ABRC should decline to follow the Kendrew strategy, but instead ask SERC to fight for economies at CERN, to cut back on what it spends domestically on high-energy physics but not to raise the threat of withdrawal until more is known of the future pattern of spending. More constructively, the question might be rather whether the CERN agreement should be amended. Is it strictly necessary that national subscriptions should be determined only by gross national product?

The problem of NERC is also urgent. The argument that this research council, cobbled together in the 1960s, should now be broken up is strong (see *Nature* 311, 493; 1984) but is probably unpalatable to too many influential people. Last week's Royal Society document was only incidentally an inquiry into the research council's way of working, and as such is not sufficient basis for root-and-branch reform. But a few things should be clear. First, it is absurd that Britain should pull out of the Deep Sea Drilling Program because NERC's funds are otherwise committed. ABRC should issue the appropriate instruction. Second, it is a tragic waste of people that the British Geological Survey's staff should this year lack the funds to do scientific work

for similar reasons. The cause may be the unwillingness of other government departments to pay for commissioned research, but the Royal Society's committee is right to say that the British national interest requires continuity in this field. If the survey's work can be secured only by transferring it to some other branch of the British government, so be it. Finally, given the committee's cogent criticisms of NERC's record on the award of research grants to academic geophysicists, there is a strong case for transferring that part of its function lock, stock and barrel to SERC. This is what ABRC should be saying, and quickly. □

## Waxman's way

*The US Congress should abandon its scheme to set up two new research institutes.*

THE US congressional calendar is once again burdened by Representative Henry Waxman's attempt to wish on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) two entirely unnecessary research institutes, one for arthritis and one for nursing. The outcome is predictable, and will be no different from what it has been in the past three years. Waxman's bill, which has already been passed by the House of Representatives, will in due course be sent off to the White House and vetoed by the President. This is what happened last year, and nobody expects the outcome to be any different this time. The explanation is simple enough. The administration thinks the two extra institutes unnecessary, and has said so. It is also suspicious of Waxman's motives. Although this year's version of the bill (like last year's) is a considerable retreat from the earlier versions that would have given Congress detailed control of the way the individual institutes of NIH spend their budgets, there is no reason to think that Waxman has abandoned his ambitions to strengthen congressional control of the NIH budget. But while this legislation lies in limbo, three of the institutes (including the National Cancer Institute) will have to limp along from year to year by means of a continuing resolution that gives the administration authority for a year to keep on spending at last year's rate.

This is hardly the way in which the US Congress, which over the years has been generous almost to a fault to NIH, should deal with its favoured dependants. But it is not likely that, if NIH is required to set up further institutes, the flow of funds from Congress will be increased? That is how supporters of Waxman-like legislations have argued in the past, urging that NIH should welcome the creation of one institute for each recognizably distinct disease. It goes without saying that the political benefits for those members of Congress who force on NIH institutes dedicated to the cure of particular diseases will be far from unimportant. But this suggestion that a symbiotic relationship between Congress and NIH would ultimately benefit both is offensive because it betokens a thorough misunderstanding of the way in which NIH functions.

Congress, its constituency in the United States and biomedical research internationally have hugely benefited from the flexibility with which NIH are organized. In the recent past, the contribution of people at the National Cancer Institute to the understanding of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) would have been no greater if Congress had decreed four years ago that there should be a special institute devoted to this novel scourge. Nor would matters have been much improved if, using the powers to control institute budgets in detail which featured in earlier versions of Waxman's bill, Congress had insisted that teams at the National Cancer Institute should not let their curiosity wander beyond the field of potentially oncogenic viruses so as to encompass that which now appears responsible for AIDS. In short, the recipe of one institute for one disease is a recipe for rigidity in a system where flexibility has miraculously flourished, sometimes against the odds. That is what Mr Waxman, and his colleagues in the Congress, should now openly recognize. □