

Ocean Drilling Project

Britain still seeks for membership

WITH six weeks to go before the deadline, Britain is still scrambling to find 40–50 per cent of the £2.5 million fee needed to resume membership in the Ocean Drilling Project (ODP). As the crunch nears, Dr John Bowman, secretary of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), says the drive to participate has intensified. But so far, the roughly £1 million needed to take Britain over the top has not materialized. Britain was a member of the previous United States-led Deep Sea Drilling Program, but has not joined ODP for lack of funds.

“There is no doubt anywhere”, says Dr Bowman, “of the scientific merit of ODP.” Geologist Joe Cann, closely connected with ODP since 1975, described the importance of the new phase of the project. During the drilling of new holes, data will be gathered by sophisticated logging instruments (see *Nature* 316, 8; 1985); the holes will also be used for long-term monitoring of continuing processes beneath the sea floor, rather than as mere sources of rock samples. One of the most significant of the planned ODP projects, according to Dr Cann, is to intercept the deposits formed at the submarine hot springs that spew zinc, iron and copper sulphides into the ocean.

Mr Ed Nickless of NERC claims that 100 per cent of the membership fee could follow from talks now going on between the Department of Energy (DOE) and the oil industry, but not everyone is as optimistic. DOE, according to Dr Cann, is interested only in funding the drilling of holes in British waters that can then provide stratigraphic data of immediate relevance to British oil interests. The oil industry, which would prefer to do its own exploratory drilling, supports ODP as a source of ideas, not drilled holes. But Dr Cann points to the number of strategic ideas gathered from previous ODP trips that have been turned into exploratory tools for the oil industry in an “impressively rapid time — 5–10 instead of the usual 20–30 year span”.

Refusal to dig deep into pockets also results from competition. British Petroleum, says Cann, looks at its direct competitors, primarily Exxon, and sees no reason why it should fund its country's involvement in ODP when the US company makes no comparable sacrifice. Additional industry money, therefore, could well not become available without an arrangement about taxation that would allow both industry and government to save face.

Dr Bowman defends the government's position, saying the shortfall of £1 million is a bigger hurdle than it may seem, particularly to observers in the United States, Japan and France, countries “with a lot more money to spend on the physical sciences”. Besides, he says, there are many reasons to fund scientific research other

than the data gathered. But this, according to Dr Cann, is the real problem with British funding for the physical sciences in general and ODP in particular.

One case in point is British involvement in Antarctic research. So that a strong presence can be maintained there, the budget of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) has been doubled in three years, from £6 million in 1982 to £12.96 in 1985. The results, Dr Frank Laws, head of BAS, is quick to point out, are easy to find — more staff, building programmes, satellite communication, heavy-cargo operations and funding of university research.

Yet these large sums of money earmarked for Antarctica do not give BAS unusual independence from NERC, says Dr Bowman. BAS just happens to be the primary research group funded by NERC which is involved in Antarctica. Because of ODP's work in the Weddell Sea, moreover, Dr Bowman says that rechanneling some of the Antarctic funds towards ODP would be appropriate. That amount, according to Dr Laws, would be a “significant contribu-

tion” that would still “not seriously affect” BAS operations. By the same test, says Bowman, any sums taken from BAS would come nowhere near the elusive sum needed for British ODP membership.

Fiddling with budgets, says Dr Cann, can only hide the real problem. He claims that ODP decisions “have not been taken on any scientific basis at all,” that “no real scientific presentation” has allowed, for example, “an analysis of the relative scientific importance of ODP and BAS”. The compartmentalization and politicization of such budgetary decisions is a description supported by the Royal Society Report on Geophysics, which sees Britain often taking on the role of poor relation in international efforts such as ODP. “Somebody, somewhere”, says Dr Cann, “should make an impartial judgement” about the relative importance of physical science research as well as about ODP.

If Britain fails to find the full membership fee by 1 October, efforts will continue to join at a later date. NERC has put the ODP fee as second in priority to university research in its requests to the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, which will adjudicate in late November or early December. **Elizabeth Collins**

UK research

All change at research council

IN what may seem the nick of time, Britain's largest research council, the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), has found a new chairman. Professor E. J. W. (“Bill”) Mitchell, head of



the Clarendon Laboratory at the University of Oxford, will begin a five-year stint on 1 October, only a month after his predecessor, Sir John Kingman, leaves to become vice-chancellor of the University of Bristol. At the same time, no fewer than six members of the 17-strong council will be replaced, at the end of their four-year terms, by newcomers.

Professor Mitchell is a solid-state physicist with a reputation as a forceful admi-

nistrator. His succession as chairman of SERC has been rumoured for some months. As a member of SERC since 1982, he will know of the unfinished business on the council's agenda. There is still no decision on the future of British collaboration with CERN, the high-energy physics laboratory at Geneva, while two important issues (support for astronomy and biotechnology) have been delegated to working parties that are likely to report only later in the year. The council's own corporate plan is still being worked on, while there is no certainty about the way in which funds will be divided between the five research councils next April.

The newcomers include Mr David Shore, technical director of APV Holdings, who will become chairman of SERC's engineering board; Dr Charles Reece, director of research and technology at ICI; Professor Malcolm Jeeves, the psychologist who is now vice-principal of St Andrew's University; Professor Brian Fender, vice-chancellor of Keele University and formerly director of the Institut Laue-Langevin, who will be chairman of SERC's science board; Professor Robert Wilson, professor of astronomy at University College, London; Professor Donald Perkins from the University of Oxford, a particle physicist who will become chairman of SERC's nuclear physics board; and Professor David Davies from the University of London, an optical fibre specialist. □