

Edinburgh or Manchester.

The decision itself is impeccable, and properly within SERC's gift. SERC decided early in the year that a move was necessary, largely on the grounds that RGO had become a somewhat self-preoccupied institution that would benefit from stronger links with British universities. The managerial case for combining RGO with the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, SERC's first preference, has been talked down by the British community of astronomers, while the more daring option, that of moving to Manchester, seems to have been abandoned out of deference to those among the RGO staff who believe that life north of the River Trent would be uncomfortable, a little like living in a foreign country. The result is that Cambridge will become both the administrative and academic centre of British astronomy. (Those now working at Edinburgh will increasingly think themselves marooned.)

This prospect is not necessarily bad; Cambridge is an excellent place. SERC also deserves some credit for having made a decision, a decision of any kind. But it has had to do so in the face of a torrent of complaints. Having pulled off this one triumph, SERC should resolve that it will not allow itself to be alienated a second time from those whose interests it exists to foster. This moral needs to be learned elsewhere as well.

Nobody doubts that SERC has the interests of British astronomers at heart. Over the past few years, it has been exceedingly generous towards them. There is now a prospect that British astronomers will have access to optical observing equipment, in the Canary Islands and in Hawaii, relatively more modern than they have enjoyed since, in the eighteenth century, Herschel made his name as a builder of telescopes. So why do British astronomers bite the hand that feeds them so well? Because they have a sense that SERC, acknowledged to be generous, is nevertheless acting high-handedly. It is not so much a benefactor as a nanny who "knows best". Why else does it not publish the two reports on the future of RGO (and Edinburgh) which apparently failed to come to an acceptable conclusion (in the eyes of SERC).

The remedy should be obvious. SERC should devise means by which its constituents can make their needs felt. Traditionally, SERC has delegated this task to the Space, Astronomy and Radio Board, formally taken as representative of astronomers because, in due course, most people of distinction pop up amongst its membership. But this is no longer an acceptable way of dealing with major decisions about the development of new instruments, telescopes in particular. Instead, there should be a committee whose members are not bound by secrecy and which is not forever having to measure its claims on resources by the calculation that rebuffs will diminish its authority in the competition for dwindling resources. Far better that there should be an open independent committee representing astronomers and their interests to which all working astronomers would have access, and able to ask for projects that are occasionally turned down. This is how high-energy physics is dealt with in the United States (see *Nature* 321, 636; 1986). The system does not rid high-energy physics of frustration, but it makes decisions intelligible.

How would such a system work in Britain, where restraints on public discussion seem all too natural? As things are the best lightning conductor for the opinions of the users of SERC's generously equipped new observatories would be a committee organized by the Royal Society or on some other independent base whose job would be the definition and repeated redefinition of researchers' needs. It would remain for SERC to decide how its facilities should be managed, which is its proper function. While about the job of setting up this mechanism, the research councils should also pay attention to the needs of other disgruntled parts of the research enterprise, the geophysicists, for example. The principle, which applies generally, is that users' needs are not merely useful planning information for managers, but are the only basis on which a sensible programme can be designed. □

Eureka discovered

The ministerial meeting of the Eureka project has said all the right things. Does it mean them?

THE European Eureka project, conceived by President François Mitterrand of France as a counter to what seemed the technological threat to Europe of the Strategic Defense Initiative, seems to have taken on a life of its own. The British government, for one, seems to have been converted from scepticism to enthusiasm, at least to judge from the speech at the opening of the third ministerial conference, in London this week, by the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. The British government seems to have been persuaded by the experience of the past eighteen months that the Eureka project has not flowered into yet another trans-national bureaucracy in Europe, that there is no danger that it will become a vehicle for other peoples' chauvinism and that it may even be a useful vehicle for urging on faltering Europe some of the policies from which it has consistently shied over recent years. That is more than a little to be grateful for.

Yet Eureka remains a project whose success so far are intangible, and whose promise is hard to pin down. Mrs Thatcher this week repeated the old adage that Britain is strong on discovery and weak in their application. She went on to complain at the tendency of technical people in Europe to disparage the application of good ideas, and to urge that people should pay more attention to the design of products suited to their intended markets. The difficulty with this familiar homily is that, now, it is out of date. Technical people all over Europe would give their eye teeth for the opportunity to design marketable products. They know that nations that fail on that score become impoverished remarkably quickly. The impediments to European prosperity are now more probably structural than psychological.

Structural? When much of Europe is linked together in a community called popularly a "common market"? How can that be? Because the common market is in no real way a common market in the ordinary sense, but rather a loose gathering of ten European nations provided with common (and often irksome) services by a central bureaucracy, with a general understanding that they may discriminate against each other's goods and services only by bureaucratic means and, to the extent that they are united, drawn together by their mutual suspicion of each other as traders. The unexpected success of Eureka, which functions by facilitating but not financing collaborative projects involving European companies and universities on technical projects, is that it has helped in several subtle ways to exorcise this long-standing suspicion.

So where will Eureka lead? Mrs Thatcher was right to insist this week that Eureka by itself is insufficient, and that something has to be done to make the common market genuinely common. But how? Governments' own xenophobia in public purchasing is an obvious place to start (as she said), but governments have been more willing to applaud the abstract principle than to change their own ways. That is why Eureka's well-wishers must also hope to build on the psychological changes now well under way in the informal European community, that in which people enjoy crossing frontiers without formality. One of the missing ingredients of Mrs Thatcher's speech this week was the recognition of the importance of the educational system, and especially of European universities, in providing the cultural cement that will, given encouragement, turn into economic cement as well. For, when everything has been said about the need that Europe should be more conscious of markets in Europe and elsewhere, it remains the case that Europe is dangerously short of the skills needed to carry out that task. Eureka may be working well so far, but its further success will only serve to draw attention to the urgent need for a coordinated system of higher education and research. This will be a great opportunity, but will at first be seen as a threat to national integrity. □