

Double British jeopardy for European laboratory's plans

Heidelberg

BRITAIN and the Netherlands, longstanding thorns in the side of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), are once again creating problems. Both countries have demanded a review of parts of the laboratory's scientific programme before deciding whether to agree to its plans for expansion, largely in biocomputing. And by remaining unwilling to agree even to the much-reduced research budget request of the European Commission (*Nature* 327, 5; 1987), Britain is putting the laboratory's biocomputing plans in double jeopardy.

The expansion in biocomputing, an

enhanced programme of courses and workshops and further support for the Hamburg Outstation at the Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron Laboratory are EMBL's three main plans for 1987-90. The scientific programme that incorporates these plans has been approved by the 14 countries that finance EMBL, but Britain and the Netherlands have not approved the 2 per cent annual increase in budget needed to finance the expansion, which would cost Britain about £150,000 a year. Instead, they have delayed a decision while awaiting a review of current activities from the scientific advisory committee of the laboratory. Matters

Cuts in defence research hit low morale of UK industry

London

A MODEST reduction, in real terms, in the United Kingdom's defence research and development budget for the coming year has provoked criticisms from the country's high-technology industries, which accuse the government of 'running down' Britain's research effort in favour of more procurement from overseas. The issue is particularly sensitive because defence-related projects account for more than half of total research spending in the United Kingdom.

The criticisms surfaced in the wake of the publication of the government's white paper (policy document) outlining expenditure on defence for the year. It showed the research and development budget with a small increase to £2,350 million from £2,260 million last year. The government was quick to justify the change, claiming that too few commercial products evolve from defence-related research, that more resources should be devoted to the civil sector and that no future support would be given to programmes that seem to duplicate those of Britain's NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies.

The new policy was stoutly defended in the budget paper, which claims that the government "shares the underlying concern of those who fear that necessary investment in defence research and development may crowd out valuable investment in the civil sector".

The critics maintain, however, that the government has shown a marked reluctance to support civil research in Britain and in Europe, in collaboration with its partners in the European Economic Community, while paying little heed to

the growing numbers of British scientists emigrating to work in the United States.

The UK defence industry has recently suffered two setbacks — the Royal Air Force rejected the GEC-developed Nimrod early-warning aircraft in favour of the Boeing AWACS on the grounds of radar performance, and Plessey's Ptarmigan battlefield-communications system lost the competition with a French system for a contract with the US marines. The report does little to allay fears that further disappointments may be in the offing, saying that special emphasis will be given to "avoiding duplication of successful equipment developments already achieved by our allies... our policies of increasing competition in procurement, and encouraging greater international collaboration to meet the equipment needs of the Alliance, are already aimed at ensuring more effective use of Britain's research and development resources".

Last year the government set up Defence Technology Enterprises Ltd (DTE), a company created to encourage the commercial exploitation of Britain's defence research. The budget paper refers to 15 licences that have been agreed or are reaching completion, through the DTE, for "exploitation of innovative technology from the research establishments". The report also updates the work of British researchers on the US Strategic Defense Initiative. By the end of last year, \$34-million worth of work had been awarded to 36 UK companies and academic institutions. Some 400 companies and 100 academic institutions have expressed an interest in conducting research for the programme.

Bill Johnstone

Statement on the Defence Estimates (Cmnd 101-111, HMSO, £5.50).

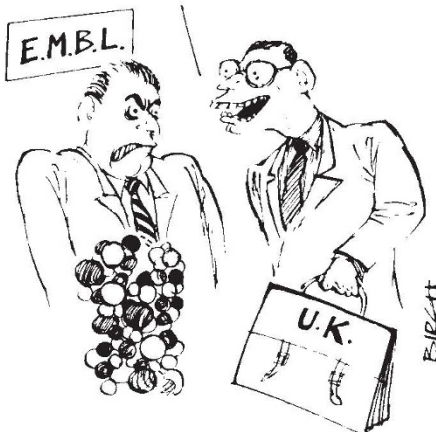
should come to a head in July.

To accommodate the expanded biocomputing programme and to provide the auditorium necessary to increase its teaching activities, EMBL needs to add a £2.3-million building, which would be completed in September 1988 if the budget is approved. The biocomputing programme is budgeted at close to £3 million, of which just under a third should come from the Land of Baden-Wurtemberg, and just over a third from the European Economic Community's bioinformatic programme, once British objections to the European research budget can be resolved.

There will be two main strands to the expansion in biocomputing under Chris Sander. One involves increasing research on protein folding, with emphasis on improving the ability to predict a protein's secondary structure from its linear sequence of amino acids. The other is to strengthen EMBL's role as a European centre for data collection and analysis.

EMBL is already the European half of the (losing) battle to keep an up-to-date database of all nucleic-acid sequences. An

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important part of Sander's plan is to enable 'cross-talk' between the nucleotide sequence database and related databases, in particular the protein sequence database of the National Biological Research Foundation in Washington DC and the protein structure database at Brookhaven National Laboratory.

If the biocomputing programme is a success, it will be a feather in the hat of EMBL's director-general, Lennart Philipson, whose initial five-year term has been followed by a three-year renewal which may yet be extended by two years to 1992. His biggest headache remains the inability of the laboratory to attract and keep the staff necessary to maintain a strong programme in structural biology. That, and the recent loss of the laboratory's team of gene mappers, under Hans Lehrach, seems to leave the laboratory incongruously weak in molecular biology for the time being.

Peter Newmark