

Dingell encounters feather wall

Mr John Dingell's committee in the US House of Representatives has predictably made very little headway in its inquiry into the immunology of transgenic mice. But it is too soon to celebrate a famous victory for science.

REPRESENTATIVE John Dingell's subcommittee in the US House of Representatives has had a frustrating time in its search for scandal at the Whitehead Institute (see page 163). After two days of hearings, there is not much to say unless it is that formal congressional inquiries are not the best way of refereeing research reports. Dingell may have known that all along. His declared purpose in hearing public evidence about the antecedents of a single published research report was not so much to tell whether the conclusions drawn therein are correct, but to throw light on the scientific community's claim that it can be trusted to police its own affairs. But on its own recognizance, so to speak, the subcommittee misled itself by looking for quasi-judicial mechanisms for assessing people's quality and prudence, whereas the mechanisms that matter are informal. Good research reports may change the course of history, others are forgotten.

That is not to say that formal mechanisms for regulating quality and accuracy have no place in science. During the past few years, institutions as different as university departments and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have been faced with the unhappy need to invent one formal device after another for dealing with allegations that published research is not what it seems. The Dingell committee is exercised that many of the committees established to look into particular incidents have been less than fully effective. That NIH are having to reopen the inquiry into the disputed paper dealt with at the Dingell hearings is unfortunate, to say the best of it. The moral for science is that when, for whatever reason, the informal mechanisms for telling what is good and what less good have to be replaced by more formal mechanisms for enquiring into allegations of more serious wrongdoing, the formal mechanisms should be rigorous and should be prosecuted with zeal.

For what it is worth, the disputed paper of which Dr David Baltimore is the most celebrated author should never have become the subject of an inquiry such as that of the past two weeks. Nobody has ever claimed that it was written and published with the intention to deceive. When Dr Margot O'Toole (who gave evidence last week) first complained that one of the reagents used in the study was not as specific as had been thought (and was afterwards claimed to be), she acted properly by raising the issue internally. It is not her fault that this claim afterwards became a *cause célèbre*. If Dingell's eventual report

should say that it is a black mark for science that O'Toole has been unjustly in the wilderness for the past three years, that will be only fair.

Baltimore's role in the affair, now often named after him, is similarly unnecessary. At the outset, it may have seemed natural that the most distinguished of the small group of authors of the disputed paper should have assumed responsibility for defending it against criticisms, first internal, then external. But that may have been mistaken: the laboratory bench is a great leveller, at which it is not always possible for a person to vouch that a colleague's work is as careful as his or her own. Baltimore seems also to have acted haughtily when Mr Walter Stewart and Dr Ned Feder, acting then as private citizens, embraced O'Toole's original complaints and multiplied them, for each, taken singly, is small.

The scientific community has rallied to Baltimore's defence; the Dingell committee will have been inundated with mail (not always flattering) this past week. The community's instincts are right: congressional committees do not make good referees, while, three years after the appearance of the disputed paper, it can hardly matter whether its conclusions are correct or otherwise. But the community, in defending one whom it rightly considers a true hero, should not make his mistake of defending what need not have been defended. The issue is not whether Baltimore and his colleagues were right in 1986, but whether they and others have the right in good faith to make mistakes. □

Deciding about bombs

There is just a week in which to find a Western compromise on nuclear weapons in Central Europe.

THE crunch is at hand on the issue of short-range missiles in Europe. Next week, there will be a meeting of the council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), attended by heads of government including President George Bush, at which West Germany's wish to open negotiations with the Warsaw Pact on short-range missiles will be under fire, chiefly from Britain and the United States. The following week, Mr Mikhail Gorbachev is due in Bonn, and can be relied upon to