

US laboratories under fire over government controls

Washington. The head of an independent inquiry into the future of the laboratories funded by the US Department of Energy (DoE) has expressed "grave concern" that the department is encouraging tighter supervision of the laboratories by government officials, rather than giving contractors a free hand to manage them.

Robert Galvin, chairman of the electronics company Motorola, claimed during a meeting last week of the task force he heads that, in some DoE documents, "every paragraph predicts greatly increased involvement by the Department of Energy in managing the contractor".

The documents include the report published in February of the Contract Reform Team set up by Hazel O'Leary, the Secretary of Energy, which sets out long lists of new departmental functions. On overtime policy, for example, it recommends that "existing controls [should] be expanded to ensure the most appropriate and judicious use of contractor overtime".

Galvin, who was questioning witnesses about a new contract to operate the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory, said he was unsure whether, even under new contracts, such intense oversight gave contractors the freedom to manage sites effectively.

The laboratories employ 30,000 scientists and engineers, and many more support staff. They are designated as government-owned, contractor-operated facilities, or 'Go-Cos'; but Galvin said that some of the words and actions suggested they are "government-owned, government-operated" facilities.

Galvin later said that his remarks were "not intended to be accusative" but were to help the task force to pursue its inquiries, now close to completion. But their tone was reinforced by Will Happer of Princeton University, head of energy research under the Bush administration, who warned the hearing of a department approaching "the Soviet style of management, with a few people dealing with real problems, underneath a vast management bureaucracy".

Happer said that the Go-Co concept "is being steadily eroded by DoE oversight which goes far beyond the real needs of the taxpayer". In his time at DoE, Happer said, "we increasingly had people meddling in the smallest detail", with reports arriving on his desk "which I never read, and no-one on my staff did either". Happer said he placed the blame not on past or present administrations, but squarely with Congress and its steady output of regulations.

The long-standing tension between scientists in the laboratories and DoE officials has recently been aggravated by the dominant view of the former — especially on the weapons and nuclear energy side — that the current administration is hostile towards their work.

The hottest issue to be tackled by the Galvin task force is the rationalization of the three nuclear weapons laboratories — Los Alamos and Sandia in New Mexico, and Lawrence Livermore in California. One outcome thought to be under consideration is a new mission for Lawrence Livermore as a national environmental laboratory.

Colin MacIlwain

Britain to rebuild scientific ties with South Africa

Cape Town. After years of separation, Britain and South Africa have announced plans to renew formal scientific links and provide official backing for closer scientific collaboration. John Major, the British prime minister, and Nelson Mandela, the South African state president, last week signed a declaration of intent to draw up a bilateral agreement on science and technology.

Announcing this move in his address to the South African parliament, Major referred to research in pharmaceuticals, water treatment and food production, and the teaching of science and mathematics in schools, as areas in which British expertise could be of assistance to South Africa.

Major was accompanied on his visit by Sir Michael Atiyah, president of the Royal Society, and Sir William Stewart, his chief scientific adviser, as well as officials from the Office of Science and Technology. In addition to talks with government ministers and other officials, the delegation visited universities and research councils.

Stewart later described the meetings as "very positive". He said that Britain has offered to provide advice on restructuring South Africa's science system to meet its economic and social priorities, and on transferring scientific results to industry and other bodies responsible for its application. Funds for such an initiative were likely to be approved by the British government once a programme was established, Stewart said.

Friedel Sellschop, deputy vice-chancellor (research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, and co-chairman of the ministerial advisory committee for arts, culture, science and technology, has now been invited to coordinate proposals for collaboration in preparation for a future visit by David Hunt, the British minister for science.

Some individual negotiations are already taking place. The South African Foundation for Research Development, for example, is discussing closer collaboration in astronomy with the UK Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. New agreements are being proposed on both the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) at Sutherland in the Northern Cape Province, and the Radio-astronomy Observatory at Hartebeeshoek in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging Province.

Atiyah promised close links between the Royal Society and the new South African Academy of Science, which is due to be established later this year. As South Africa rejoined the Commonwealth in July, South African scientists will once again be eligible for election as fellows of the Royal Society.

Michael Cherry

Gupta censured — but keeps his job

New Delhi. Viswa Jit Gupta, the geologist at the Panjab University in Chandigarh, India who was found guilty earlier this year of faking Himalayan fossils (see *Nature* 369, 698; 1994), has been barred from any administrative post in the university, and will receive no further annual salary increments. But his job remains secure.

The punishment was adopted last week by the senate of the university. This followed a four-hour discussion of the report of an inquiry, headed by retired justice M. S. Gujral, which found Gupta guilty of plagiarism, presenting stolen fossils, falsifying data and claiming discoveries from non-existing localities.

Five of the university's 55 senators called for Gupta's dismissal. But the majority favoured leniency as he "has been punished enough through the mental agony he had undergone".

The verdict draws the curtain on a five-year old controversy which was initiated by an article in *Nature* by John Talent, an Australian geologist critical of Gupta's work (*Nature* 338, 613; 1989). But those who were hoping that Gupta would be dismissed claim that he has got off lightly. Gupta has eight more years before retirement, and continues to hold the post of professor with the authority to supervise graduate students.

Gupta continues to dismiss the entire episode as "a conspiracy by foreigners". In a recent interview with the magazine *The Week*, he says that he still stands by all his work since 1963. "I have no intention of reviewing the papers just because of this controversy," Gupta says. "In science every one has a right to publish his own opinion based on observation."

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