

UK research councils

Hatchet buried for time being

THE Royal Society and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) appear for the time being to have patched up their differences on the support of geophysics research in Britain. That, at least, is the simplest reading of a statement put out this month by NERC and the society describing, in language usually reserved for diplomatic communiques, a meeting between the two sides which is said to have taken place in late August.

The occasion for the meeting was the publication in June (see *Nature* 315, 709; 1985) of the report of a working party on geophysics research commissioned by the society and endorsed by the society's

council. The working party, under Professor R.E. Oxburgh, complained of the generally inadequate scale on which geophysics research is at present reported. In passing, the committee made several criticisms of NERC's management of research support in the field, drawing from the research council's chairman, Mr Hugh Fish, the response that he "took great exception" to the report, and that he would seek a meeting with the Royal Society.

That meeting is now said to have examined "a number of differences of view" and to have included a "full and frank discussion of a wide range of issues". The statement says that the "Royal Society learned with interest and much satisfaction" that several changes in NERC management practice had taken place since the working party began work. The statement says that the society and the research council will work together to forge "an increasingly constructive relationship" between the scientific community and "one of its major sources of financial support". The two bodies unite, in the concluding paragraph of their statement, in saying that "many of the difficulties were largely" consequences of the reduction of NERC's budget in recent years.

The formulae in the published statement appear the basis for at least a temporary truce. NERC, meanwhile, is quick to point out that many of the criticisms raised by the working party have been met by changes already under way before the appearance of the report. Thus steps have been taken to rationalize the allocation of time on research vessel cruises (which, the Oxburgh group said, had often been cancelled at short notice, and which were complicated by the circumstance that the committee responsible for allocating research time was different from that responsible for research grants to make good use of the time). Similarly, NERC says, steps were already under way to decentralize the computing services network, which NERC researchers have been required to use but over which they have had no management control.

NERC's plans for a new management structure appear to be making progress, if slowly. The proposal, in the "corporate plan" published last year, that the council's research institutes should be grouped together under three newly appointed scientific directors has so far led to the appointment of Dr Bernard Tinker, deputy director of the Rothamsted Experimental Station, as the one in charge of the council's environmental work. The search continues to fill the two other vacancies.

Some progress has also been made towards a solution of the problem of the British Geological Survey, the largest single component of NERC's annual

budget cost — or, at least, a committee has been set up. Jointly with the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, NERC has commissioned a study from a group whose chairman is Sir Clifford Butler, vice-chancellor of Loughborough University of Technology, and which includes Sir Alan Muir Wood, Dr Charles Suckling, Sir Alwyn Williams and Sir Frederick Warner. Of these, only Williams is primarily an earth scientist, although Warner was the chairman of the recent SCOPE-sponsored study of nuclear winter.

The terms of reference for the new study are wide enough to allow quite radical recommendations. The hardships that afflict the survey, fully documented in the past year, have arisen because government departments have gone back on an agreement more than ten years ago to contribute towards the cost of the survey, but there is a body of opinion now strongly represented among members of the survey that the British government should make a commitment to the continuation of the systematic surveying of British geology. □

New law for West German universities

Hamburg

DESPITE strong opposition, the government's amendments to West Germany's *Hochschulrahmengesetz* (university regulations) have now been passed by the *Bundestag* (parliament). The changes have provoked much controversy since they were first announced by the Christian Democrat Education Minister, Dorothee Wilms, earlier this year.

In June nearly 40,000 students took part in demonstrations against the new laws (*Nature* 316, 96; 1985) and during the parliamentary debate the students' objections were raised. The opposition parties — the Social Democrats and Greens — voted against the changes, which bind the regional governments (*Länder*) to implement the new regulations during the next few years. During the debate all parties voiced the opinion that more opportunities should be made available to women scientists. But the opposition was critical of the government's position, saying that a mere declaration of intent will do nothing to improve their lot.

Whereas Wilms welcomed the new law as a "landmark for the political development of the federal universities", the opposition parties are still against the introduction of a two-tier system of studies, whereby specially talented students are allowed to take extra courses but the majority of students have to complete their studies after six semesters.

The proposed relaxation of rules covering industrial research is also unpopular. The government claims, however, that the newly created post of "scientific assistant", which replaces the old "university assistant" will help to strengthen the position of the rising generation of students. The legislation faces one last hurdle, the *Bundesrat*, which is the representative body of the *Länder* but where the federal government has a majority.

Jürgen Neffe

Japanese ibis saved?

Tokyo

A FRESH effort to save *Nipponia nippon* (the Japanese crested ibis or *toki*), from extinction began this week with the arrival of one bird from Beijing Zoo at Japan's ibis protection centre on the island of Sado. The *toki* is now one of the world's rarest birds, with only three remaining in Japan and perhaps as many as twenty in China.

In the nineteenth century, the *toki* was a common bird of paddy fields and ponds in many parts of east Asia. Its white plumage, somewhat comical red face and heavy downward curving black bill made it a popular subject for painters. But despite protection measures that began in Japan in the 1930s, numbers declined so rapidly that all five remaining birds were placed in captivity in 1981. Since then two birds have died but several more birds, including three chicks, have been discovered in China. But because the area in which they live is known to be polluted with mercury and manganese from chemical fertilizers, there are doubts as to how long they can continue to survive in the wild. Thus a cooperative programme to breed the *toki* in captivity has begun.

The Beijing bird flown in by chartered plane is a young male, named Hua Hua, which will replace Japan's one remaining male, now thought to be too old to mate. But Hua Hua is likely to find his work cut out. *Kin*, the one female in good condition, would be in her eighties if measured in human terms and, having been brought up in captivity, has never reared young. Hua Hua will remain in Japan for three years and meanwhile research on artificial insemination at the ibis centre will continue.

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