
Molecular Biology: European Laboratory Still In Limbo

Geneva. A European conference on molecular biology held in Geneva in April did not bring establishment of a much-discussed European laboratory measurably closer, but the talks seem to have put relations between the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) and European governments on a friendly footing.

An organization of individuals formed in 1963 to promote European cooperation in biology, EMBO has aspects of an exclusive club, a supranational academy of the biological sciences, and a pressure group for projects dear to the hearts of biology's new breed.

Creation of a regional, multidisciplinary laboratory was one of the objectives of EMBO's founders. It has been evident that paying for such an institution and for other parts of the EMBO program will require the support of governments, and the conference in Geneva was a first formal meeting of EMBO and governmental representatives. The Swiss government convened the meeting, which was held at the headquarters of CERN, the European nuclear research organization. Only CERN member governments were represented. The surroundings were ap-

propriate, since CERN is a presumptive model for a governmentally underwritten EMBO, and CERN officials have taken a fraternal interest in the biologists' cause.

Despite its absence from the agenda, the subject of a European laboratory did come up at the meeting. Not unexpectedly, discussion revealed that scientists generally favor the idea, but most governments are decidedly cool to any immediate action to create a regional laboratory. Governmental representatives did, on the other hand, seem disposed to consider making public funds available to continue and probably to expand EMBO's present activities in providing fellowships and courses. EMBO now administers a program of postdoctoral fellowships financed primarily by the Volkswagen Foundation. This grant runs out next year, and intergovernmental financing of the program is expected to be discussed late this year at a continuation of the recent conference.

The sensation of the meeting occurred, however, when the French offered a site for a laboratory and, the implication was, a building. The offer was unexpected and caused a furor. Some at the meeting apparently ques-

tioned French timing and motives; others felt that, in view of the hostility to the laboratory in some quarters, the French initiative may have kept the door from being slammed on the idea.

Governmental opposition seems to stem mainly from a reluctance to see a diversion of funds and a loss of researchers to a regional program. Scientists argue that a major laboratory drawing on regional resources is necessary for continued development of biology in Europe and, incidentally, to counter the lure of the United States for European biologists. Debate on the laboratory has been suspended, but partisans feel that the idea is still very much alive.

Whatever the prospects of the laboratory in the long run, the conversion of EMBO to a government-supported organization will involve some changes in structure and style. EMBO up to now has been a small organization dominated by a group of well-known men who know each other well. EMBO members want to preserve this informality and autonomy to the greatest degree possible, and it will be interesting to see how the give and take will go in the negotiations ahead.

—JOHN WALSH

artistic and philosophical creations of the Greeks did to theirs, or the great cathedrals did to medieval Europe. In a certain sense, it not only serves the purposes of our society, but *is* one of the purposes of our society." In that essay, Brooks had a great deal more to say about the role and value of basic research in modern society, and the brief quote does not do justice to his formulation. Nevertheless, with the passage of 2 years, during which a good deal of ferment has taken place over the role and value of basic research, we now find Brooks stating the following:

After many decades of inadequate attention to basic science, and inadequate recognition for scientists, the United States may have over-reacted. Raising the status of applied science in universities has become a real problem. . . . Historically, a certain snobbery has always existed between pure and applied science, but whereas once the exponents of pure science represented a small and rather ascetic minority who took pride in sacri-

ficing the greater material rewards of applied science for what they thought of as the greater psychological satisfactions of pure science, today both the gaps in material reward and external prestige between basic and applied science have largely disappeared. However, some of the mythology of "we happy few" in basic science has persisted. As pointed out by many observers, the values and attitudes of the academic "subculture" are increasingly becoming the dominant values of the influential segment of society as a whole. . . . The business tycoon of the last generation boasts of his son's achievements as a theoretical physicist or a Sanskrit scholar. . . .

Perhaps too much can be read into this one passage, but when Harvey Brooks even toys with the possibility that emphasis on basic research may, if only inadvertently, produce undesirable side effects, it must be recognized that something new and important is stirring inside the politics of science.

Edward Teller, long a forceful advocate of greater emphasis on applied research, stated in his essay that there

are sound reasons for the enthrone-ment of basic research as a superior intellectual activity, but says "the pendulum seems to have swung too far. Together with the greater appreciation of pure science, a tendency to despise applications of science has been introduced. These are considered below the dignity of a real scientist; they are scorned as intellectually irrelevant and as usually having merely economic interest."

On another point, Teller stated, "as one who argued strongly for the creation of the first large-scale secrecy wall around a government project [the wartime atom bomb project] in American history. . . . I wish to recall the very proper, almost universal repugnance with which it was greeted at the time, to express my growing unease with the continuation, spread and acceptance of the practice, and to warn that it is probably making an overall negative contribution to our nation's security; it certainly had an adverse influence on