

# British Association Seeks Corporate Links

*Corporations subsidized the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and are playing a growing role in its activities*

*Brighton, England.* Visitors to last week's meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BA) found themselves being guided across the campus of the University of Sussex by signposts sponsored by a local television company. If lost, they could seek help from university postgraduates wearing T-shirts prominently displaying the initials of the local subsidiary of a major U.S. telecommunications company. In extremis, they could make their way to the pressroom, sponsored by one of Britain's largest scientific publishers.

Times are changing for the 152-year-old BA. Moving in step with a broad trend in Britain toward corporate sponsorship of public events, such as art exhibitions, it is encouraging stronger links with the industrial sector.

In the past, the annual meetings of the association have been heavily subsidized by the universities in which they take place. But heavy pressure on university spending in Britain over the past few years has dried up many of the reserves from which such support had to be drawn, and outside sponsorship has become increasingly critical.

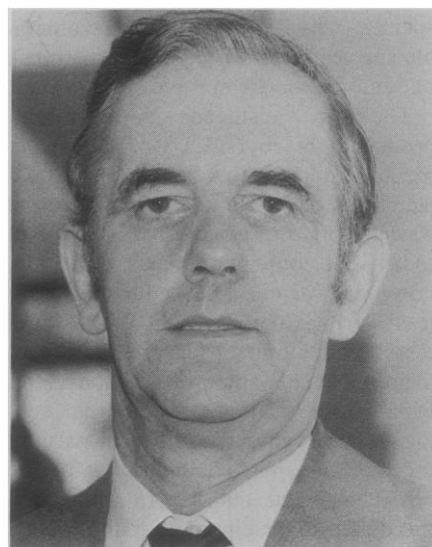
Indeed, the proposal to hold this year's meeting at Sussex University ran into strong opposition among some members of the university's arts faculty and technical staff. They claimed that the university's support of the meeting—which some estimated might, based on previous experience elsewhere, run as high as \$110,000—could result directly in lost jobs and fewer teaching resources at the university.

Faced with this resistance, the local organizing committee mounted an intense fund-raising campaign. The appeal, assisted by the BA's national office, brought in about \$50,000 from local and national businesses, some of which was donated for specified purposes. And the total bill facing the university is now likely to be only about \$7500.

BA officials admit that the corporate sponsorship of the annual meeting is based partly on the need for a secure financial base to combat recent declines in attendance and rising costs. Some of the appeal money was used to place advertisements about the meeting on a local television station; and one weekly science magazine contributed by placing a free advertisement on its back page for

several weeks. Both of these moves, combined with the fact that the meeting was being held at one of Britain's most popular seaside resorts during the best summer weather for several years, helped to reverse recent trends and produce a record attendance.

At the same time, however, the BA is deliberately moving in a new direction by actively seeking greater involvement by the corporate community in the sub-



**Sir John Mason**

*British Association president.*

stance of its activities. Over the past year, for example, it has introduced a new category of corporate membership, with a minimum subscription of \$750 a year; established a science and industry committee chaired by prominent industrialist (and next year's BA president) Sir Alistair Pilkington; and recruited a chemist to explore ways in which the association can convince Britain's industrial leaders that it deserves both their financial support and—equally important—their endorsement of its efforts to promote the public image of science.

BA officials emphasize that they do not anticipate making any revolutionary changes in the association, which this year's president, meteorologist Sir John Mason, describes as "an annual parliament and festival of British science and technology."

Nevertheless, they are encouraging a process of steady evolution in which an industrial perspective will, it is planned, gradually be infused into all the association's activities. "When the BA was

started over 150 years ago, it was mainly a question of scientists speaking to their fellow scientists," says Bernard Dyer, the association's new full-time science and industry officer. "Subsequently, the public were included in the discussions and, most recently, young scientists." Current efforts to encourage greater participation by industry, he suggests, is the next logical step.

So far, 23 organizations have agreed to sign up as corporate members, ranging from well-known names such as Barclay's Bank and IBM (UK) Ltd., to the Bank of England and United Biscuits. The income they will provide will be an important source of revenue for the association; indeed, the subscriptions from corporate members are already almost as high as those received from individuals.

What the companies will get in return has not yet been spelled out in detail although various ideas are in the air. One is that they might use the BA as what Dyer describes as a "neutral forum" for discussing public policy on the social aspects of their operation, such as the disposal of toxic or radioactive waste. "Through a series of 1-day meetings, we might try to generate a consensus of opinion on such issues which could be presented to the government as a basis of political decisions," says Dyer.

A more pragmatic suggestion being studied is that the BA might act as a type of marriage broker, putting university scientists interested in seeing their ideas turned into commercial products in touch with companies looking for new technological innovations.

BA officials admit there is a danger in the new initiatives, namely, that by accepting a greatly increased involvement by private corporations, they may be prejudicing—at least in the public's eyes—the very neutrality which they are using as the basis of their claim to act as a "disinterested forum."

But they also emphasize that, as in the United States, major high-technology corporations and the banks which provide their capital are growing increasingly aware of the need to promote a more positive image of science and technology among the nation's schoolchildren, and that it is through this public relations role that the British Association is likely to be most relevant to some of their future needs.—**DAVID DICKSON**