

Britain Pulls Out of Unesco

Paris. There was heavy irony in the air at the Paris headquarters of the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) on 9 December. On the same day that Unesco awarded its prestigious Kalinga prize for science writing to one of Britain's leading scientists, the Nobel laureate Sir Peter Medawar, it was facing strong protests from its officials over staff cuts whose need has been significantly increased by Britain's decision to withdraw from the organization on 1 January.

Britain's determination to carry through with the notice of withdrawal, which it delivered just over a year ago, was announced on 6 December in the House of Commons by Timothy Raison, the minister for overseas development. Taken together with the previous withdrawal of the United States, it means that Unesco's operating budget next year will be 30 percent lower than in 1984.

Raison said that recent reforms in Unesco, many of which were stimulated by attempts to prevent Britain from leaving, had fallen "well short of what we believe could justify continued British membership." He added that the \$7 million a year that Britain would have spent

on its Unesco contribution would be used for other activities designed to benefit developing countries.

For example, the British Council is expected to be provided with more funds to provide training places in British institutions for Third World students, particularly from the Commonwealth. Raison also said that some of the money saved would be spent directly on international scientific programs.

Unesco's director-general, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, issued a statement last Friday saying that he "profoundly regretted" the British departure, and adding that "it can only come as a surprise to those who, over the past 2 years, have put considerable efforts into achieving agreement on Unesco's program, budget and operation."

Elsewhere in Unesco headquarters here, however, the reaction has been less one of surprise than disappointment that the changes agreed to at October's general conference in Sophia proved insufficient to convince Britain to change its mind, despite some promising sounds from London during the summer that Britain was reconsidering its position (*Science*, 30 August, p. 839).

Many now feel that the indications of a

possible change of heart were little more than window-dressing, and that, given the known hostility of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (herself a former minister of education and science) and several of her cabinet colleagues and top foreign aid officials towards the organization, the final outcome had been virtually inevitable.

British officials strongly deny that their decision was taken under pressure from the United States, which is now no longer isolated in its censure of the organization, or that they intend to withdraw from any other United Nations body. Rather, they insist the Unesco remains excessively bureaucratic and too critical toward the Western developed nations; and they feel that Britain's foreign aid policies, which have recently been giving increasing weight to its own political, industrial, and commercial objectives—can be better achieved by more direct means.

Despite predictions that had been made earlier, Britain's action is unlikely to be followed by any other significant departures, at least not in the immediate future. Singapore announced last Friday that it, too, was leaving on 1 January; but several other major donors—in particular Japan, West Germany, and Canada—have recently made statements indicating that although they agree with much of the thrust of the British criticism, they intend to continue as members and to work for reforms from within.

In the immediate future, the main problem facing the organization is how to absorb the extra 5 percent cut in its income, on top of the 25 percent resulting from the loss of the U.S. subscription. Several hundred layoffs are already expected to be announced from the Paris headquarters within the next few weeks, and severe program cuts will have to be made in addition to those already agreed at Sophia.

In the medium term, the most pressing question remains the choice of successors not merely to the much-criticized M'Bow, but also to his various assistant director-generals, each of whom is expected to be replaced after he leaves. Preliminary soundings are already being made for the successors to each of these posts. And the Paris newspaper *Le Monde* has suggested in a front-page editorial that the best thing that M'Bow could do for Unesco's future was to consider leaving before the end of his term of office, which officially still has two more years to run.—DAVID DICKSON

Britain Joins SDI Research

Britain has become the first European country to endorse President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative by signing an agreement with the United States covering the terms under which British scientists and engineers will take part in the program's research phase.

Disagreement over the terms of the agreement—reflecting fears that substantial involvement by British scientists in SDI research could divert scarce talent and resources away from projects more directly tied to Europe's own civilian and defense needs—had previously held up endorsement of a draft reached last month in Brussels by the British Secretary of State for Defense, Michael Heseltine, and his U.S. counterpart, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger (*Science*, 13 December, p. 1251).

Even after the draft had been revised by Heseltine and Weinberger to increase the intellectual property rights that British scientists and companies will be able to claim, the terms of the agreement are said to have continued to meet opposition within the British cabinet.

However, the revisions to the draft were apparently sufficient to persuade a majority of cabinet members that the agreement could now be signed by the two governments. Even though Heseltine was unable to get the commitment to \$1.5 billion of research contracts for British companies he had sought in return for Britain's political support for SDI, Weinberger said that Britain could still expect a "very substantial" amount of work.

The Ministry of Defense intends to set up an SDI office in London, directly comparable to that which exists in Washington, through which all contracts to British scientists and engineers will normally be channeled. The United States has already said that it is particularly interested in tapping British experience in lasers and electro-optics.—DAVID DICKSON