Britain to Remain in CERN for Now

A report recommending staff reductions at Europe's leading high-energy physics laboratory helped persuade Britain to remain a member

Geneva

THE British government has decided not to quit the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva at the end of next year, as had been recommended by some leading members of its scientific community. Instead, Britain will remain a member, even though the cuts in the UK's subscription which had been suggested as a necessary condition for staying are unlikely to be made.

The government's decision follows the presentation last month of the final report of a committee set up by the CERN Council under the chairmanship of French physicist Anatole Abragam. The committee, set up 2 years ago at Britain's suggestion, had been asked to look at ways in which CERN could increase its operating efficiency and reduce its costs, currently about $580 million a year.

The recommendations of the Abragam committee include reducing the number of scientific and technical staff by 300 (about 10% of the present number), cutting back substantially on the proportion of staff employed on unlimited contracts, and exploring other ways in which member states might be able to pay their subscriptions (for example, in currencies other than Swiss francs).

CERN's management has already agreed to draw up procedures for implementing most of these suggestions. Firm decisions on what steps to introduce to achieve economies will be taken by the Council next October.

"The UK wishes to remain a full and active member of CERN, provided that a sound basis for doing so can be established," William Mitchell, chairman of the British Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), told the members of the CERN Council at a meeting in Geneva just before Christmas.

But the Abragam report, he said, had pointed out serious deficiencies in the way that CERN was run which supported the UK's view that operating costs could be reduced significantly while the overall productivity of CERN was sustained.

Three years ago, a British committee headed by molecular biologist Sir John Kendrew suggested that Britain should withdraw from CERN unless it could find ways of reducing its annual contribution by 25%.

Kendrew's conclusions were reiterated last year by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, the body made up primarily of academic and industrial scientists which advises the government on how its science budget should be spent. This board pointed out that the declining value of the British pound, when combined with the complex formula used to calculate each country's annual contribution to CERN, meant that Britain's contribution had grown from about $61 million in 1986 to $94 million in 1987.

There is general agreement that the quality of CERN's research must not be compromised.

Britain's threatened withdrawal generated widespread protests both in its own high-energy physics community and among the scientific communities of other European nations. However several other governments shared Britain's concern at the high costs of CERN and therefore actively supported the setting up of the review committee.

Two conclusions underlie the committee's recommendations. The first, based primarily on discussions with the CERN user community in both European and non-European universities, was that the scientific program was considered to be first-rate. "Our basic conviction was that the CERN program was sound and that no part of it should be sacrificed," said Abragam in presenting his report to the Council.

The second conclusion was that a cut of 25% in CERN's overall operating budget would have such calamitous implications that a specific request from Britain to consider the consequences could not be seriously addressed. "A 25% reduction would be quite impossible," says Wolfgang Kummer, outgoing chairman of the CERN council. "It would be disastrous both for CERN and for the whole particle physics field in Europe."

Between these two positions, however, the committee set out a number of detailed recommendations about how the operation of CERN could be streamlined. One proposal, for example, is that the proportion of scientific and technical staff employed on open-ended contracts should be reduced from its current level of 86% to less than 50%.

The most immediate impact on costs will come from reducing staffing level by 10% over the next 2 to 3 years.

Other changes will be the subject of negotiation between the member states. Some are keen that France and Switzerland, the two countries on whose common border CERN is situated, both pay a "host country prime" on top of their subscriptions to balance the extra income they receive, for example, through local maintenance contracts.

Britain has also suggested that alternative forms of funding experiments might be introduced, such as the two-tiered system of compulsory and optional programs used by the European Space Agency, although such a development was firmly rejected by the Abragam committee, whose report stresses that CERN's scientific program has to be seen as a coherent whole.

There is still a long way to go before details of both the internal rationalization and the possible restructuring of contributions are agreed. British officials emphasize that each needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency; they imply that the threat of withdrawal remains in force in case a satisfactory resolution is not achieved.

But they also appear to have been stung by the charge, which they reject, that the threatened withdrawal from CERN showed a lack of European spirit. "It must be possible to discuss these questions of efficiency without being labeled as non-European, and as not being interested in European science," protested Mitchell of the SERC.

At the laboratory itself, there is a mixture of apprehension at the impact of the proposed economies, and relief that, so far, Britain is planning to stay. Organizations representing the personnel, for example, have already expressed their strong opposition both to the voluntary redundancies and to other schemes that could reduce the attractions of working at CERN. "But the storm seems to have passed," says one physicist. ■ **DAVID DICKSON**