

Briefing:

Britain Agrees to Spend \$470 Million on New European Space Program

Paris

Things are looking up at last for Britain's space scientists. After many months of hesitation, the British government has agreed to participate in the Columbus program being launched by the European Space Agency (ESA). Part of the program will cover the European contribution to the space station currently being planned by the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Kenneth Clarke, Britain's minister for Trade and Industry who last fall scornfully dismissed Britain's support for other major new ESA projects—in particular the small space plane Hermes—announced that the government has agreed to contribute 250 million pounds (\$470 million) to Columbus.

In return for this contribution, Britain expects to be given prime responsibility for the design and construction of a polar orbiting platform to operate in conjunction with the space station.

The size of the contribution to Columbus is almost identical to the current predicted cost of the polar platform, which will follow a sun-synchronous orbit and carry a range of earth observation instruments. In addition to the government funding, Clarke announced that British Aerospace, the leading industrial candidate for building the platform, will put \$9.25 million of its own money into the project. The government has also agreed to spend an additional \$37 million to construct a new center for collecting and analyzing earth observation data.

The British contribution will amount to 5.5% of the costs of the whole Columbus project, which is being primarily funded by West Germany (38%), Italy (25%), and France (14%).

The British government has been under considerable pressure from other members of ESA to overcome its previous reservations about the European projects in general, and Columbus in particular. West German research minister Heinz Riesenhuber is said to have written at least twice to Clarke, expressing concern that continued criticism of Columbus might have a damaging effect on the whole European space effort.

In addition, ESA's director for space science, Roger Bonnet, has been warning that Britain's continued reluctance to accept the 5% increase in space science programs supported by all other ESA members could lead to a situation in which the European agency

would be better off without Britain's presence. This issue is still unresolved.

The recent announcement will mean a small increase in the British space budget, currently pegged at around \$225 million a year. An extra \$17 million will be required to the current year, although in general the project will be funded out of the funds allocated to the British National Space Center, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said last summer that she saw no reason why this figure should be significantly increased without a comparable commitment from the private sector.

The news that Britain will participate in Columbus, even at the lower level than initially hoped for, coincides with the announcement of a new director of the British National Space Center, Arthur Prior. A senior civil servant with the Department of Trade and Industry, Prior will fill a position that has remained vacant since Roy Gibson, a former director-general of ESA, resigned from the position last fall in protest at the government's decision not to provide any new funds for space activities. ■ D.D.

Animal Day

Animal rights activists whose goal is the elimination of animal use in research have settled into a yearly routine of demonstrations across the country to mark "World Laboratory Animal Liberation Day" on 21 April.

The scientific community has been slow to come up with attention-getting devices to counter the publicity, but this year the Foundation for Biomedical Research held a celebrity press conference to "say thank you to the animals," says the foundation's director Frankie Trull.

The thank you was backed by some impressive personalities, including Helen Hayes, whose daughter died of polio just before the vaccine was developed; actor

Tony Randall, who is involved with the Myasthenia Gravis Foundation, and transplant surgeons Michael DeBakey of Baylor Medical College and Thomas E. Starzl of the University of Pittsburgh Medical School.

Also present was Janna Koch, founder of a new Florida organization, the Incurably Ill for Animal Research. Koch's 7-year-old daughter Lilah received the world's smallest pacemaker as a 4.5 pound infant. Koch reported that her organization has AIDS, Alzheimer's, and cystic fibrosis sufferers and their families as well as organ transplant patients as members.

Everyone talked about how much they like animals—Helen Hayes gives money to protect the hack horses in Central Park—and how necessary they are for testing surgical procedures and vaccines. Four little children, all recipients of liver transplants at the hands of Starzl, were trotted out. "When I look at these beautiful children, I simply cannot understand how anyone would impede" the progress of research, DeBakey said with feeling.

Meanwhile, on the National Institutes of Health campus a few miles away, protesters were gearing up for their demonstration. About 200 people, most of them rather young and healthy-looking, heard speakers explain that "prevention" is the answer to disease, and that researchers suffer not so much from sadism or greed as from "godhood," or need "to maintain their status as superior beings."

One protester carried a sign reading "Dr. Goodwin! Explain your memo!" This was a reference to a September 1987 memo by Frederick Goodwin, research director at the National Institute of Mental Health, in which he called on the Department of Health and Human Services to adopt a more "pro-active" stance on animal use in research. Activists have seized upon this to accuse the Public Health Service of funding a "covert campaign" against them. ■ C.H.

DeBakey speaks

Transplant surgeon describes new developments as Tony Randall and Helen Hayes look on.

