

Go-Ahead for Gene Sequencing Venture

Paris

The governments of Britain and France have agreed to help support a \$72-million project being launched by a consortium of two major research institutes and two research equipment companies to develop an "automated molecular biology laboratory," which is being referred to as LABIMAP.

A key element in the project, which was approved in Copenhagen last week for inclusion in the EUREKA program of advanced technological cooperation, will be the joint development of DNA sequencing technologies.

The companies involved are the British research products firm Amersham International and the French equipment manufacturer Bertin et Cie. The project is being launched jointly with the Imperial Cancer Research Fund in London and the Centre d'Etudes de Polymorphismes Humaines (CEPH) in Paris, both of which are expected to play a significant role on any global program of human genome sequencing.

Part of the financing, as with all EUREKA projects, will come from the two participating companies and part from the two governments concerned. ■ D.D.

Cosmos Club Drops Ban on Women

The Cosmos Club, the District of Columbia's bastion of luminaries in science, literature, and the arts since 1878, propelled itself into the 20th century last weekend. By an overwhelming majority, its members voted to consider women for membership for the first time.

Club president Tedson J. Meyers said 771 members gathered for the vote and that only 14 or so opposed the motion to admit women. Two previous attempts—in 1973 and 1975—to break the sex barrier had failed.

The members were helped in their decision-making by a 1987 finding of the D.C. Office of Human Rights that the men-only policy probably violated the city's tough antidiscrimination law. The club also had been threatened with an affirmative action suit and—perhaps more frightening from the members' point of view—the loss of its liquor license.

Economics played a role, too. The club has 350 membership vacancies and has had trouble filling them. Younger men have

been reluctant to join a club that would exclude able women from membership. Potential members with political aspirations have become increasingly reluctant to add to their résumé a membership that might prove embarrassing to them later.

One prominent scientist and father of three daughters declined to be nominated for membership because he wanted no part of a club that would not consider his daughters for membership. ■ G.B.

Mass Retirement in the Leadership of the Soviet Academy

Almost half the members of the ruling presidium of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences are being replaced because of old age as part of a campaign led by academy president Guriy Marchuk to revitalize the Soviet scientific community.

Seven academic secretaries and nine academicians—all but one said to be over the age of 75—have agreed to vacate their seats on the presidium 2 years before their current terms of office expire in 1990.

All will remain advisers to the presidium, and will therefore retain many of the privileges of presidium membership (thus making up what is being described in some quarters as a "paradise group"). But their influence on the academy's affairs will be significantly reduced.

Their replacements are being chosen through a series of ballots of academy members. In many cases, according to Lev Semyonov, the head of personnel for the academy, several candidates are being put forward, and their relative merits are being carefully discussed.

According to a report in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiya*, Semyonov has said that the "unprecedented" resignations of the 16 presidium members reflects a desire "to involve young and talented scientific organizers more actively in restructuring."

He added that, in addition, there were still 20 directors and 3 deputy directors of academic institutes considered by the academy to be of "an advanced age," as well as 160 heads of subdivisions, an indication that most of these are likely to be asked to follow the presidium members' example.

Among those who have agreed to withdraw from the presidium is Marchuk's predecessor as academy president, the 85-year-old physicist Anatoly Alexandrov. The former chairman of the state committee on science and technology, the energy specialist Vladimir Kirillin, also withdrew. ■ D.D.

Senate Passes Genome Bill

A bill that would create a new panel to oversee the federal genome project passed the Senate last week by a vote of 88 to 1. The Biotechnology Competitiveness Act of 1987, S. 1966, sets up within the executive branch a Biotechnology Policy Board, with the general goal of boosting U.S. competitiveness, and a National Advisory Panel on the Human Genome.

How the massive genome project will be coordinated has been at issue since it was first proposed. The National Academy of Sciences recently recommended that a lead agency be designated, while the congressional Office of Technology Assessment preferred an interagency panel, similar to this one. Meanwhile, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Department of Energy—which have asked for a combined \$46 million for genome research for fiscal year 1989—have repeatedly said that no new mechanism is needed.

As spelled out in the Senate bill, chiefly sponsored by Lawton Chiles (D-FL), the genome panel would be jointly chaired by the NIH director and the secretary of energy. Members would include the directors of the National Science Foundation and the National Library of Medicine, four industry representatives, four university representatives, an ethicist, and a representative of the philanthropic community. All members would be appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate—a provision others think is unworkable if the panel is to be constituted any time soon. The National Academy of Sciences would nominate all but the industry members.

Within 18 months of its creation, the panel would report to Congress and the President on the best strategy for completing the map and sequence of the human genome.

In a move to mollify abortion opponents, who threatened to block the legislation, as well as to calm fears about eugenics, the bill also reauthorizes the troubled congressional Biomedical Ethics Board and gives it a role in reviewing the genome panel's reports and in otherwise monitoring the ethical issues that might arise from genetic research.

The bill now goes to the House, where James Scheuer (D-NY) of the Science, Technology and Space Committee will hold hearing on a similar bill on 14 July. But the bill's ultimate fate rests with John Dingell (D-MI), the powerful chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

■ L.R.