RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Basic Researchers to Head U.K. Councils

The U.K. government may have hit rock bottom in the public opinion polls, but academic scientists are making an exception for science minister William Waldegrave. He has snared two widely respected researchers—both Fellows of the Royal Society—to fill top vacancies at two of Britain's research councils.

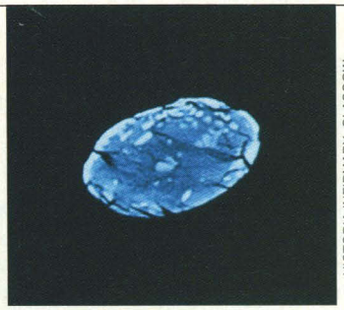
Last month, Leicester University x-ray astronomer Ken Pounds was picked to lead the new Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council; and last week, behavioral ecologist John Krebs of Oxford University was named the next head of the Natural Environment Research Council. Both assume their posts on 1 April, when the research council system will be relaunched with six councils instead of five, and with an explicit mission to enhance U.K. industrial competitiveness (*Science*, 4 June 1993, p. 1419). The councils are Britain's main source of funds for basic research.

The new appointments are a source of some relief to academic scientists who fear that all the talk about competitiveness will lead to a lurch in the direction of short-term, applied research. "We welcome these appointments," says John Mulvey of the academic lobby group Save British Science. Both Krebs and Pounds agreed to serve only after being assured that they would be free to develop their respective councils' scientific priorities. And both will continue to spend some time in their labs.

One top research council post remains unfilled—at the new Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council. Waldegrave's selection committee is still hunting for a suitable candidate.

Digging Out a Dinosaur Embryo

The CT scanner at the Victoria Infirmary in Glasgow peered inside an unusual patient recently: a large fossilized dinosaur egg. The resulting images, though indistinct, show the egg has a definite inhabitant. Paleontologists hope it is the embryo of a large herbivorous dinosaur, such as a brachiosaurus, for which an embryo has not yet been found. "The CT scan shows differences in density and you can see shapes inside the egg...there's definitely something inside," says Neil Clark, curator of palaeontology at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow.



VICTORIA INFIRMARY, GLASGOW

Fossilized small fry. CT scan of 80-million-year-old dinosaur egg. White blips are embryo remains, which have a higher density than surrounding material.

The museum bought the egg, along with five others, from China last July, with financial help from a local leisure complex that sports a model dinosaur in its swimming pool. Some of the eggs had hatched, but at least two are still intact.

Embryos from small herbivorous dinosaurs have been found before, but the size of the Glasgow eggs—15 to 20 centimeters in diameter—indicate they were laid by something much bigger, Clark says. And all the really big dinosaurs were vegetarians.

With the CT scan complete, as well as a scan with a magnetic resonance imager that also gave a tantalising glimpse of contents, the team must now decide whether to go ahead and open up the egg, which is no easy task. Researchers at the museum must first dig the egg out of the sandstone that encases it and make a caste. Then they will have to remove the 2-millimeter-thick eggshell and dig in, one grain of sand at a time. If they find bones, there may be some remains of proteins that will enable the researchers to identify what sort of beast laid the eggs, and to learn more about these giant herbivores as small fry.

A Big Bang by No Other Name

It was more like a Big Whimper. With great fanfare, and reporters hanging on every word, *Sky and Telescope* magazine announced at January's meeting of the American Astronomical Society the results of its much-publicized contest to rename the Big Bang, the explosive theory of the start of the universe (*Science*, 25 June 1993, p. 1881). And the winner was...nothing.

After sifting through more than 13,000 entries, the contest's three judges decided that none was superior to the cosmological nickname coined—and intended as a put-down of the theory—by astronomer Fred Hoyle in 1950. "There's nothing that even approaches the phrase 'Big Bang' in felicity—especially when we bear in mind its familiarity and easy usage worldwide," noted Carl Sagan, who judged the competition along with ABC's Hugh Downs and astronomy writer Timothy Ferris.

That's not to say that there weren't some attention-getting entries. Among them: *Big Burp Theory*, *Jurassic Quark*, *Blast from the Past*, and *What Happens if I Press This Button*. Acronyms like *HUGE (Hypothetical Universal Gravitation Expansion)* and *The NICK (Nature's Initial Cosmic Kickstart) of Time* were also plentiful. The most common entries, such as *Creation*, *Cosmogenesis*, and *Genesis*, had a Biblical ring.

Hoyle continues to favor a steady-state model of the universe in which there is no beginning or end. So to him, there's no urgency to the naming contest—he told the magazine's editors that Big Bang theory will be disproved within a few years anyway.

Silicon Valley Moguls Chip in for E.T.

The Universal Search will continue—but not with universal funding. Private money, and not U.S. taxpayers, will support the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI), according to the group spearheading the effort.

To demonstrate its professed newfound fiscal restraint, Congress canceled NASA's SETI effort last October—saving around $12 million in 1994. Now the private SETI Institute in California, with Jill Tarter, former head scientist for the NASA project to guide them, has decided to take the search over. It has obtained commitments totaling $4.4 million from a number of Silicon Valley business leaders, including David Packard and William Hewlett of Hewlett-Packard Corp., Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel Corp., and Paul Allen, cofounder of Microsoft Corp. These industry giants are donating private, not corporate, funds. Why would they chip in? "They're in it for the adventure. They have vision," comments SETI Institute scientist Seth Shostak.

The new effort required a new name, of course, and one has been coined: Project Phoenix. For the project to rise completely from the ashes of last year's budget battle, it needs another $3 million to operate through 1995, but institute officials are confident they'll find the money. A fundraising effort has even begun in Japan.

Even if it finds the addtional $3 million, Project Phoenix will be a slimmed down version of its former self. The original NASA project had planned an all-sky survey for incoming signals, but the institute will concentrate on NASA's other goal: detailed observations of 1000 nearby stars. Phoenix will get a little help from NASA to broaden the search, says Shostak: A sophisticated radio receiver, built for NASA's SETI effort and capable of listening to 30 million frequencies at once, will remain on loan to the institute.