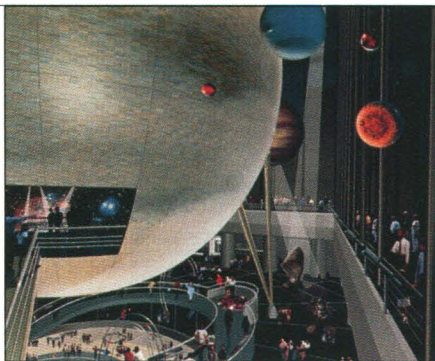


U.K. to Set Up Genetics Panel

Six months after rejecting the proposal, the British government announced this week that it will, after all, create a national commission to examine a wide range of human genetics issues. However, the new plan calls for the panel to function only in an advisory capacity.

Last summer, a House of Commons science committee proposed that a high-level body be set up to regulate gene therapies and oversee genetic screening. In January, the government agreed only to an advisory group on genetic testing. Committee members argued again this spring for a broader advisory body (*Science*, 3 May, p. 637), and the government appears to have concurred. The proposed panel—which is to include geneticists and public health experts—will review scientific progress in genetics and report on issues of public health, insurance, patents, and employment. “It goes well beyond the piecemeal response by the government to human genetics so far,” says David Shapiro, secretary of the independent Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

The science committee still hopes the panel could eventually be given regulatory powers, although the government has expressed little enthusiasm for the idea.



Spaced out? Gingrich wants to use NASA funds for natural history museum upgrade.

Museum Project Wins Gingrich's Ear

Republican lawmakers have long railed against Democrats for funding pet projects not requested by the Administration and targeted to a single congressional district or state. But now that the Republicans are running Congress, they're finding that the practice called earmarking may not look so bad—particularly if the request comes from the House Speaker.

The earmark in this case is tucked within a 1997 House spending bill for NASA. The provision directs the agency to spend \$13 million on renovations and new exhibits at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, not one of NASA's usual grantees. The money would come out of the hide of NASA's Mission to Planet Earth (MTPE) program, an Earth-observation project

that Republicans have criticized as too expensive. It was Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) who asked the House Appropriations Committee to give funds to the museum, according to congressional sources—after the committee had already cut the MTPE's \$1.3 billion budget by \$200 million.

What motivated Gingrich? The Natural History museum is undergoing a \$130 million renovation, including improvements to the famed Hayden Planetarium and installation of new exhibits. Museum officials, who hope to raise most of the funds from private sources and state and local government, had been pressing Washington to chip in 10% of the cost, which led to Gingrich's request. A museum spokesperson says the project “will link learning about the cosmos with that of Earth processes and the study of life on Earth.”

The bill goes to the House floor by next week, where it may put House Science Committee Chair Robert Walker (R-PA)—both a close Gingrich ally and a leading opponent of earmarks—in an awkward spot. Walker said through a spokesperson this week that his committee “has never been in favor of earmarks, and

neither have I.” The Senate takes up its version of the bill next month; the two houses must agree on a single bill before sending it to the White House.

Council to Challenge TV Pseudoscience

Some scientists and media people are so alarmed by TV's ever-growing fondness for pseudoscience and other irrational pursuits that they're forming a Council for Media Integrity to try to get the networks to devote more air time to reason.

The impetus comes from such programs as *The Mysterious Origins of Man*, which airs various spurious theories about humankind's origin. NBC staged a rerun of the show on 8 June, followed by a 2-hour program about apocalyptic prophecies. Appalled by this type of fare, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), publisher of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, planned to formally establish the new council this week at the CSICOP-sponsored First World Skeptics Congress, at the State University of New York (SUNY), Buffalo.

CSICOP Chair Paul Kurtz, professor emeritus of philosophy at SUNY Buffalo, says the issue “is a worldwide problem because the U.S. media is worldwide.” What will the council do? “Monitor these shows,” says Kurtz. “Bombard TV columnists [with letters] ... do position papers. Show where these programs are wrong.”

The council has 15 members so far, including former *Nature* Editor Sir John Maddox, science writer Martin Gardner, and Harvard physicist Gerald Holton, author of the recent book *Science and Anti-Science*.

Japan Eyes Site for Neuroscience Center

Japan's Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (RIKEN) is awaiting word on whether it has been chosen to host a major new neuroscience research center. The center, which would be directed by RIKEN neuroscientist Masao Ito, would be the focal point of broader government investment in the field.

The increased attention to neuroscience may not show up in a new 5-year plan for expanding the nation's research efforts that an advisory panel is expected to release later this month. That document, which fleshes out a basic science law passed last fall, will not target specific fields. Neuroscience, however, is seen as a priority because the field seems poised for major advances, says Yasuhiro Itakura, an official with Japan's Science and Technology Agency (STA).

There are already 14 groups at RIKEN working on neuroscience themes under the institute's Frontier Science Program. But Ito says those projects, which have a fixed life of 15 years and focus on emerging areas, are “becoming too big for the Frontier system.” The new institute, he says, would attract foreign visiting researchers as well as coordinate the growing efforts of universities and national laboratories in Japan.

STA's Itakura emphasizes that no final decisions have been made about the new center or funding for existing programs. Referring to the country's protracted recession, he says that “the budget situation is very tight.” A decision is expected by the end of June, however, so that budget proposals can be approved before the 1997 fiscal year begins in April.

Note: A 7 June ScienceScope about the *Origins* broadcast contained an incorrect World Wide Web site. The correct URL is <http://www.bcvideo.com/bcvideo>. The site given was set up by critics of the program.