

Scientists wary of costly human space flight plans

Researchers hit out this week at what they see as a crass decision by the government to start talking up manned space missions, just after slashing physics and astronomy budgets late last year.

The British National Space Centre's 2008-12 space strategy, published on 14 February, indicated that manned space missions could be back on the agenda for the first time since Margaret Thatcher's government withdrew from the European Space Agency's manned programme in 1986.

The centre also announced that it will conduct a review for the government of the possible benefits of investing an estimated £100 million each year to support human space flight, as well as robotic missions. The review is to be complete within twelve months.

It further announced, on 15 February, that the UK may work with NASA on the MoonLITE programme, which includes a robotic mission to the moon.

George Fraser, director of the University of Leicester's Space Research Centre, welcomed the comprehensive nature of the BNSC document. "A civil space strategy is something that we haven't really had in a coherent way before," he said. "The strategy of the past 20 years has been largely determined by what we won't do rather than what we are committed to."

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However, Fraser believes that physicists who would support human space flight under different circumstances are unlikely to give their blessing to such an expensive endeavour unless the government can come up with extra funding to support it. The Science and Technology Facilities Council is aiming to make savings of £120m in the wake of its 2007 comprehensive spending review settlement and has no extra cash to splash out on any new projects, let alone one of this magnitude.

"I think in the current climate it's very crass to say we are going to put £100m into anything when £120m is going out and will not be replaced," Fraser says. "At the moment it seems that it's difficult to make any positive decisions for human space flight because of the dreadful things that may be happening elsewhere."

A spokesperson said the BNSC recognises the UK's strength in robotics but wants to follow up on recommendations made last year by the Space Exploration Working Group, an advisory body that said in September that the UK should take part in manned missions to keep up with international space efforts.

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Stem cell researchers win consent exemption

Scientists will be allowed to generate embryos from existing stem cell lines without prior consent from the donors of the cells, under a government-backed amendment to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill.

The exemption—which only applies to cells that were donated for general research purposes before it was possible to clone embryos—was announced in a letter published by the Department of Health on 7 February.

Before the amendment, the bill would have made it illegal to use such cells in embryonic stem cell research. The government had argued that cloning embryos from cell lines without specific consent from donors would be an infringement of Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which deals with the right to private and family life.

But researchers, including three Nobel laureates whose letter on the topic was published in *The Times* on 21 January, successfully argued that this restriction could threaten their progress in investigating conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

The government is now working to put safeguards in place to ensure that the exception is used only in situ-

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ations where research would be hindered by waiting for new stem cell lines to become available. The revision is not intended for use as a means to side-step "administrative inconvenience", the department's letter warned.

Britain has had relatively permissive legislation on the use of stem cells, and has been hoping to attract leading scientists from abroad as a result. But some observers say that the liberalisation of laws in other places may weaken that advantage. "France and Spain now have policies in line with the UK's, Germany has just voted to liberalise the law and California is investing a huge amount in stem cell research," said Stephen Minger, director of stem biology at King's College, London. "The UK will have to work harder in the future to remain competitive."

Stem cell scientists were previously successful in lobbying the government to drop plans to outlaw the creation of human-animal hybrid embryos for stem-cell research in December 2006. Last month, the fertility regulator approved applications from two teams of British scientists to carry out research using hybrid embryos.