Rejoining UNESCO After a 12-year absence, Britain rejoined the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 1 July, just two weeks after the Labour Party's landslide election. The decision by the new prime minister, Tony Blair, reverses the Conservative government's withdrawal from UNESCO in 1985, six months after President Reagan pulled out the US. "It's good to be back," said Clare Short, Britain's Secretary of State for International Development, at a brief ceremony at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, where the Union Jack was hoisted outside, joining the flags of the 186 other member nations.

For years before the US left UNESCO, the Reagan Administration had accused the agency of arrant mismanagement and alienating partisanship (PHYSICS TODAY, February 1985, page 53). Margaret Thatcher, Britain's prime minister at the time, followed suit. The departure of the two countries depleted UNESCO's budget by 30%. Both countries demanded the exit of Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, who was serving his second six-year term as director general, and appealed for widespread reforms of the organization. Under M'Bow, the Paris payroll had waxed, eventually accounting for 70% of the budget, while support for science and education waned. UNESCO conferences proliferated in M'Bow's time—and with them, so did calculated polemics. One issue that riled US officials concerned the licensing of journalists as part of a bizarre program called the New World Information Order. Meanwhile, deserving programs to fulfill the organization's original purpose languished.

At the UNESCO headquarters, Short said Britain would support the reforms undertaken by Federico Mayor, the present director general, and would strengthen the agency's programs to promote education, preserve the world's cultural heritage and exchange ideas and information on many subjects, especially science. Mayor, in turn, said he expected the US to return to the organization soon. He reminded his audience that President Clinton had said in 1995 that he knew of no impediments to rejoining except for budgetary restraints by Congress. Britain will contribute 5.32% of UNESCO's budget and already has paid £4.2 million ($7 million) towards the six months remaining in 1997.

Hands Off Internet Data Amid protests by the National Academies of Sciences and of Engineering and several scientific societies, the US backed off a treaty on Internet commerce being negotiated by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), at a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, last December. If the majority of governments belonging to WIPO had their way, severe restrictions would be imposed on the fair and open use of scientific data. Such information would come under the rubric of intellectual property, which is just one of the nettlesome issues covered by the proposed treaty. Others are censorship, encryption, technical standards, privacy and taxation of World Wide Web sites and on-line sales.

Without seeking the views of the science community or conducting hearings on the issues, the Clinton Administration had supported the position of its own Patent and Trademark Office, which sought to impose *sui generis* ("of its own kind") protection of intellectual property. The proposed law was pushed by major publishers, on-line service providers and the Information Industry Association.

Scientists worry that this would tempt government agencies and commercial interests to control or patrol research information and databases when they seek access to publicly funded research data. It would allow database vendors to charge scientists and scholars for access at commercial rates and even, in some instances, to maintain a monopoly on new or augmented research data. To be sure, such practices could inhibit collaborative research projects that depend on constantly updated information. The Administration appeared vexed by the potential unintended consequences raised by the profusion of perverse transactions available on the Web: fraud, libel, plagarism, gambling, pornography and sedition, to cite a few.

Not surprisingly, the WIPO negotiations were suspended. Then, on 1 July, President Clinton announced the US policy: hands off the Internet. At a White House gathering packed with high-tech industry executives, the President affirmed the new medium's freedom from regulation and its potential for abetting global electronic commerce, which industry experts say will grow from about $1 billion last year to as much as $25 billion by 2000. Clinton called on all governments to follow the US approach by avoiding "unnecessary regulations," including restrictions on content, and endorsed the principle of "self-regulation." Academy officials were pleased with the policy. In April they had issued a report, "Bits of Power: Issues in Global Access to Scientific Data," which recommended that policy makers in all countries should treat the results of publicly funded research as a public good and allow scientific information to flow at little or no cost.

Again, 'No' to Powerline Cancers Another study, this one meticulously designed by scientists at the National Cancer Institute and specialists in childhood leukemia, reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that powerline electromagnetic fields (EMFs) "are not a major and probably not even a minor component to the cause of cancer." The team identified 638 children aged 15 or younger with the most common childhood cancer, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, and 620 healthy controls. This cancer strikes about 2000 children per year in the US. Measurements of magnetic fields were made in the homes in which the children spent most of their early life. The results indicated that those whose homes rated at 3 to 4 milligauss had about the same leukemia rate as children anywhere.

Still, there is a troubling uncertainty: In the fewer than 10% of the homes that showed extremely high fields of 4 to 4.9 mG, the risk was three times above normal. "We cannot exclude the possibility of a small increase in risk," the researchers concluded. But the finding was based on such small numbers—14 cases and 5 controls—that it was consistent with chance. This was also consistent with the conclusion of a National Academy of Sciences report last December (see PHYSICS TODAY, January, page 49). The latest finding is the strongest so far, said Charles F. Stevens, chairman of the academy's committee and a neurobiologist at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, but it's unlikely to completely dispel public fears of EMFs. An editorial in the *New England Journal* called for an end to powerline cancer research, which has "produced considerable paranoia, but little insight and no prevention."

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