

nature

February 27, 1975

Are summit agreements of much use?

WHATEVER the outcome of top-level meetings that heads of state seem to delight in, the agreements on scientific, technical and medical cooperation can always be relied on as a stand-by. If the discussions were cordial, wide ranging and in an atmosphere of mutual understanding then there were probably plenty of good things to emerge: grain deals, trade credits, non-aggression treaties and the like are bound to eclipse anything on the scientific side. But if the discussions were merely correct, a helpful exchange of views and in an atmosphere of mutual respect, then scientific agreement is wheeled out as a major symbol of that mutual respect, and some hare-brained joint projects are launched. Part of the deal often consists of trips for the presidents of the respective academies around endless laboratories of their counterpart's country. Few scientists have not had at some time or other to conduct an immensely bored (with great justification) scientific luminary on a fifteen minute tour as the result of some cosmetic deal concluded ages before by heads of state.

Mercifully, Mr Wilson returned from Moscow last week with a bagful of deals to present to the public, so we were spared Anglo-Soviet cancer projects, joint expeditions to the South Pole and so on. And yet although not eye catching, there are agreements of interest to the scientist, although you'll have a job finding out much about them, as not many people in Whitehall seem to know very much about what went on.

Perhaps the most bizarre idea to emerge was of a round-table conference of academics. Apparently someone (Harold Wilson, one suspects) thought it a good idea to put together a diversity of 'distinguished representatives of public life, science, culture, commerce, the press and other fields' from the two countries. When in Britain they will meet under the auspices of the Royal Institute for International Affairs, which thought it a bit premature to say anything other than that the concept has not progressed very far yet. How this strange group will be 'selected', what it will talk about and what good will be done by it has yet to be spelt out. We shall follow its career with the mildest of curiosity.

An almost equally outrageous idea that found its way into the communique was that the Soviet Union and Great Britain would collaborate on attempts to keep to a minimum the number of underground nuclear tests; this is no doubt meant to be seen as a positive gesture by two of the three guarantors of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Since the British government has got out of the habit of acknowledging to the public its nuclear activities and since the Soviet government never got into the habit in the first place, they have both, in a sense, already kept things down to a minimum. Unless these two arch rivals start sharing their top-secret data, it is hard to see how the commitment is other than pure humbug.

On scientific and technological cooperation *per se*, the communique does little beyond pat on the back two inter-governmental commissions the existence of which we had all but forgotten. The commission on applied science, technology, trade and economic relations comes up with encouragement for joint efforts in (among other things) high temperature plasma physics, astronomy and applied microbiology, although it is difficult to see much rhyme or reason in the list.

What do scientists really want from meetings of heads of state? Nobody seems to ask the community before visits, and certainly it is hardly the easiest thing to find out to whom one should talk if one feels strongly. It is perhaps foolish to look for anything from bilateral talks; science, as opposed to big technological projects, is nominally an international affair. Nonetheless, there are some matters of principle that could have been raised. If science is indeed international and one works in a spirit of trust that transcends frontiers, accessibility is the key to scientific development. Scientists tend to rely fairly heavily, in developing their own ideas, on the work of those other scientists whom they either know and have visited or at least whom have heard favourably about from a colleague.

On the whole it is possible to form these contacts almost without limit in many countries, and the better the telephones, airlines and travel budgets the better the opportunities for doing science. The links are palpably inadequate in the Anglo-Soviet situation; exchanges of a few scientists a year do little more than scratch the surface, and the ultimate aim must clearly be to make an Anglo-Soviet agreement as redundant as an Anglo-American one would be. Neither the recent agreement, nor any envisaged in the near future, goes very far in this direction.

If you have any ideas and you don't think you will be invited to the round-table, it is a bit of a problem knowing whom you should contact. Try the International Technological Collaboration Unit at the Department of Trade.