

Although everybody's list is different, avoidance of nuclear war is at the top of most lists, as it should be: there could hardly be a more effective way of setting back the cause of development. It is not especially helpful, except as part of a recipe for the ideal world, that the commission, having recognized this, should also rail at the waste of economic resources spent on the manufacture of armaments of all kinds. (Many of the states most in need of funds for civil development are paradoxically among the big spenders in this way.) The avoidance of a collapse of the international monetary system is another threat both to the environment and development, and might have been put higher on the commission's list. The likelihood that continued accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will cause often-unwelcome climatic changes is another headache, not so much because the threat of drastic change is imminent, but because few people believe that existing international legal instruments could be adapted quickly to abate continued accumulation (but the attempt to tackle the problem of the ozone layer — see opposite — is for many people a welcome precedent). Helping to tell what weight should be given to these issues, and how, would have been a better use of the commission's time.

That does not imply that the other problems in the commission's long list should be put on the back burner for the time being, but merely that they may not deserve equal time and attention. Not even the preservation of endangered species? Sadly, the conservationists must be reconciled to losing many of the battles that lie ahead. A group of largely industrialized nations has reluctantly, some say unsatisfactorily, helped to conserve the whale population, whose commercial exploitation has become of marginal value, but is there a realistic hope that the trade in south-east Asian monkeys, a source of cash in an impoverished region, can be halted quickly, or in time to save some endangered species? And which is the more urgent need, that or the avoidance of nuclear war? Much the same may have to be said about many of the regional environmental problems listed by the commission. Development and the preservation of the environment are not necessarily inimical, and external donors can exercise a powerful influence on recipients' environmental policies. But what if the recipient governments do share the commission's views, or if they put survival first?

Even the issue of the survival of the poorest populations is not, in the real world, an absolute consideration. The classical case for generous overseas assistance — that grinding poverty, however isolated and distant, is a threat to international stability — seems to carry less weight each year with the rich countries of the world. The World Commission is right to wish that things were otherwise, but they are not, as yet. A small part of the explanation (not an excuse) is the disappointment of recent decades. While much aid has been misconceived, many recipients have been feckless in that role. It remains, for example, to be told to what extent the famines of recent years in Ethiopia are attributable to the policies of an ideological government? It must naturally be hoped that attitudes will change, but this is a general need not confined to the owners of the world's wealth.

It may be asking too much that the commission should have spelled out these unpalatable truths, but the consequence is that its report will not be easily distinguishable from other pronouncements on the same group of subjects. Nor will it, in a world not yet suffused with sweetness and light, help to concentrate attention on what needs most urgently to be done. That is a great misfortune, if only because the underlying issues are every bit as important as Ms Brundtland and her colleagues say. The commission sees its work being continued with support from the United Nations by means of a special programme and a series of conferences intended further to stimulate concern. The more urgent need is that a mechanism should be sought to determine what tasks should take priority in an imperfect world. As previously, the present generation may have to dump on its successors much of what it cannot accomplish by itself. With luck, succeeding generations may be better able to provide solutions.

## Europe's research stall

*The British Government should now be more constructive about Europe's research programme.*

THE continuing dispute between Britain and the European Commission over Europe's planned research spending during the next 4.66 years (see page 5) is in danger of getting out of hand. The origins of the quarrel (in which, originally, West Germany sided with the British) is the belief that the present pattern of the commission's spending on research is inappropriate to the emerging need. The case is easily sustained. The relevance to practical needs of much of the applied research at the commission's joint research centres is not easily understood. Even some of the programmes in whose conception the commission thinks it has been forward-looking are ill-designed: the common programme of pre-competition research and development in information technology, for example, would have been more convincing over the past six years if participants had not been required by the commission's procedures to cobble together applications for support with indecent haste. But it will serve nobody's purpose if the British simply complain that they do not approve of what is planned. Should they not now say what they would wish to see instead?

Much of what the commission does in the name of research is admirable. This is eminently true of the thermonuclear research programme, represented for the time being by the machine called JET which is in many ways a telling model for what the commission should be doing. For this is a field whose possible importance is beyond dispute, and which no single member of the communities could follow effectively on its own. The commission's difficulty is that there are not many other fields of comparable importance and similar justification on which the commission might spend comparable funds. The development of fast reactors might have been a candidate research programme in the old days of Euratom's supremacy, but that horse has bolted (chiefly to France). Similarly, the development of space launchers and of the machines they might launch is in the hands of national agencies, private and public, as well as of the European Space Agency, whose membership is not identical with that of the communities.

The commission's underlying dilemma is familiar even to national governments seeking to use central funds for the sponsorship of economically valuable research. Basic projects are welcomed, but do not yield immediate benefit, but collaborative projects nearer the market are either already in the hands of companies, or are likely to be regarded with jealousy by the parties most concerned. Hitherto, the commission has sought to turn this difficulty by requiring that companies from different member states should jointly work (and invest their own funds) in projects in, for example, information technology. Too little effort has been spent on the assessment of this technique, but the anecdotal evidence is not encouraging. Instead of acting as dog in the manger, the British government could usefully specify tests that might satisfy its objections.

Meanwhile, there is plenty else the commission could attempt. By common consent, those who work as scientists in Europe are far less mobile than Europe needs them to be, but the commission's programme in this field is only modest. Then there are some fields of basic research in which central support, even on a modest scale, could help to enrich and strengthen European science and technology in unexpected ways. The British committee that reported last week on the reorganization of the earth sciences sensibly advocated a European initiative in ultra-high-pressure studies, for example. The commission's natural fear that such a step would merely be a sop to European academics would be misplaced. For, as in Britain in particular, so in Europe in the large, the range and richness of research is not nearly as great as economic, not merely academic, considerations dictate. □