

moral force of the treaty is such that the major powers abide by it, but Britain and France can build what weapons they choose. The British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, has said she will consider negotiating about British weapons when the major powers have a strategic agreement, which will not be tomorrow. Her French counterparts have said nothing. Yet each of them will also have to say "yes" at some stage. □

## Oppressed press

Lacking constitutional protection, British newspapers are under pressure to reform — or be regulated by law.

AMERICANS concerned with press freedom are constantly surprised to find the British government banning books and suppressing news. No doubt that is why, last week, Mr Dana Bullen, the former *Washington Star* journalist who heads the World Press Freedom Committee, told an International Press Institute conference (called to discuss growing press censorship in Britain), that much of the new British Official Secrets Act is "unconstitutional".

Such parochialism, in the days of *Spycatcher*, is no longer excusable. Britain does not have a First Amendment any more than it has a Grand Canyon or a President. The US Congress may pass no law restricting freedom of the press. The British Parliament can. One private member's bill, which would have given a statutory right of reply to those who claim to be victims of inaccurate reporting, was rejected last week. Another — protecting privacy — is expected also to fail. But there is to be an independent inquiry into the conduct of British newspapers. The press, said Mr Timothy Renton of the Home Office, announcing the inquiry, has a year or two "to clean up their act". If not, Parliament will do what Congress cannot.

In last week's debate, much rage was vented against the newspapers, particularly the tabloids. But Renton, among other top Tories, expressed a deep reluctance to introduce restrictions of a kind not seen since the time of Cromwell. The Thatcher government, nonetheless, shows no inhibition at all in trying to censor the much-more-regulated medium of broadcasting. As things are, shocking as it is to many outside Britain, legally elected representatives of the legal Irish nationalist organization, Sinn Fein, including one elected to the Westminster Parliament, are banned from British radio and television. (At least, their voices are: pictures may be shown, with others speaking their words.) But the anger at the supposed damage done by the media could be extended to curbs on the press.

Those who deplore this prospect should keep in mind three factors that do not exist in the United States. One is active terrorism, ready to strike at any time. The Prime Minister was nearly killed by the Provisional IRA at Brighton in 1984 (and five of her colleagues perished). Earlier, one of her closest friends had been killed by a bomb within the precincts of Parliament itself. The second

factor is that there is a large number (eleven) of national newspapers, engaged in a bitter circulation war with each other; many will do anything to gain an advantage over their nearest rival. The third is the royal family. These unfortunate people, unlike pop stars or television personalities or politicians, are ordinary in every way except birth. Yet the smallest detail of their private lives can sell millions of papers. Privacy laws, such as those in the United States, protect people not in the public eye, on the assumption that celebrity is somehow voluntary. It will be hard in Britain to draw up comparable laws because of this royal anomaly.

Hope that legislation may be avoided lies in the intellect and personality of the new chairman of the Press Council, Mr Louis Blom-Cooper, QC. An ardent admirer of the First Amendment and a civil libertarian lawyer of international repute, Blom-Cooper has, for the past few months, led the British newspaper and magazine industry's own voluntary self-appointed regulatory body. He has sworn to make the council more responsive to public alarm. Last week he made an excellent start, by deciding that the council will conduct its own immediate inquiry into the photographic coverage by the tabloid newspapers of the Hillsborough disaster, when close on 100 people were crushed to death in a football stadium. The front-page full-colour close-ups of the faces of dying teenagers distressed many people.

The serious national newspapers — the broadsheets — consider themselves unjustly blamed for the sins of the sleazy tabloids, all lumped together as the unloved 'press'. But the so-called 'qualities' are not blameless. They seem arrogant. They do not carry correction columns of routine errors. They do not have ombudsmen to whom the public may take its grievances. And they do not editorially scold the tabloids when these — as Mr Rupert Murdoch's do — refuse to publicize the rebukes the Press Council gives them.

The British government is not blameless either. It has done nothing to prevent the concentration of newspaper ownership, which only intensifies the tabloids' circulation wars. Murdoch, who already owns *The Times*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Sun* and the *News of the World*, was allowed also to buy *Today* without the sale being referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. And the Prime Minister has bestowed a knighthood on the editor of the *Sun*, apparently forgiving him for its pornographic daily page three because of his paper's staunch Toryism.

The best outcome of the rocky year ahead would be for the Press Council and the independent inquiry to persuade the national newspapers that they must make themselves visibly more responsive to public complaints. That might stave off worse. Bullen last week supposed the virtues of the US system to be so plain that it must have been copied elsewhere. But it has not been. The British Parliament should not make laws telling British newspapers what and what not to print, but is in a mood to do so, and there is no constitution to prevent it. British newspapers, beware. □