

Which way now for Europe?

Mr Nicholas Ridley's outburst last week, and his subsequent resignation from the British government, is based on an unsustainable theory of the genetics of national behaviour much like Hitler's causes.

THE surprise is not that Mr Nicholas Ridley, until the weekend Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, believes that British membership of the European Monetary Union would be a recipe for German economic domination, but that he put his guileless views to the editor of the *Spectator* in the knowledge that they would be reported. The simplest explanation is that Ridley is so used to talking in this vein with his political friends that he had persuaded himself that the publication of his views would cause no fuss.

It is nevertheless as well that Britain's European partners should know that at least some of those with whom they negotiate hold to the unreconstructed view that there is such a thing as national character, and that it is immutable over generations.

Even the British prime minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, is not immune from the fallacy underlying this supposition. In some ways, it is more damaging for the British government's reputation that it should have come to light, at the weekend, that the prime minister held a meeting in March with a group of academic historians at which a list of supposed German character defects was canvassed. The group eventually agreed that it had "no misgivings" about the present leadership of Germany, but wondered whether "some of the unhappy characteristics of the past" might reemerge in 10 or 20 years, with "just as destructive consequences".

This is a strange position for grown-up people to be taking, implying as it does a more rigid genetic determination of human behaviour than respectable biologists would think credible.

During the Ridley crisis, it has not been much remarked upon that this opinion has much in common with that of Adolf Hitler that Aryans (whoever they are) have desirable and genetically determined behaviour. It would, of course, be absurd that Britain's position in the negotiations that lie ahead over German unity and other European matters were to be based on a genetic theory for which there is no evidence, but which is both implausible and which could well have "destructive consequences" of its own. Luckily, the majority of the British cabinet is unlikely to be stampeded in that direction.

The Ridley/Hitler view is belied by the facts. How else is it possible to reconcile Germany's role as Europe's melting-pot for the past 45 years with the casual assumption of the Ridley school that it is a homogenous and

fearsome society? As it happens, the German characteristics that Ridley and his friends most fear are recognizably the products of social institutions created since the Second World War. An excellent secondary school system has engendered enviable competence, a politically independent Bundesbank has engendered financial stability and a high savings ratio and the division of legislative power between the federal and *Länder* governments, backed up by the constitutional court at Karlsruhe, have given Germany an explicit guarantee of personal legal rights of which people (not necessarily governments) elsewhere would be thoroughly envious if they knew more about the system. Germany, moreover, is a classless state, which Britain is not.

How can it help that the primitive roots of some British reluctance to join up with Europe should now have been publicly exposed? Because they are now explicit, and will attract the ridicule they deserve. That the British cabinet is divided on the issue is also a worthwhile piece of public information. The difficulty, for those with enlightened views in Britain as well as for those elsewhere in Europe, will be to distinguish clearly between unsustainable diffidence about the development of European institutions and that which has a legitimate basis. To what extent, for example, is British insistence that a united Germany should be a continuing member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coloured by fears that the Third Reich will be recreated? And that NATO itself should then be transformed from an exclusively military organization into one of political and even economic dimensions when its continuing functions might more conveniently be subsumed into those of other institutions?

Luckily, the British politicians (ministers especially) who are known not to share the Ridley view of Europe will now be more free to be influential. In relation to the European Communities, for example, it will now be simpler for those who fear the protectionist tendencies of the European Communities to make their arguments explicitly, unclouded by suspicions that their hidden agenda is to keep Germany in its place. There is even reason to hope that the frank disagreement, based on philosophically different views of the origins of national characteristics, within the British government will now be argued out, and that those who hold to the unreconstructed Ridley view will be forced to concede defeat. That could be good for Europe as well as Britain. □