

of the present budget, it would not be improper that the trustees should set out to find the funds from elsewhere. But this time, the museum should consult its constituency in advance, and not simply produce a document like a rabbit from a hat.

What NHM should have learned from the commotion of the past several weeks is that it is not just another British research institution, as disposable as Kleenex, but one whose research function is genuinely international. The museum should have been particularly stung by those who have donated their personal collections to the museum in the belief that it was a perpetual institution. NHM's collections and their investigation have a better claim on such a status than most other research collections. The trustees would now seem to have a stark choice: either to exert themselves so as to redress the balance between exhibition and research, if necessary making nuisances of themselves in the process, or to resolve to dispose of the collection to some institution elsewhere that will be able to use it properly. □

Computers for sale

The sale of ICL to a Japanese company is not necessarily a bad thing.

INTERNATIONAL Computers Limited (ICL), the British computer manufacturer sold this week to Fujitsu, has a chequered but absorbing history. It is the inheritor of the venture embarked on by the British company Ferranti in the late 1940s which led, by 1949, to the realization of an admired and then technically advanced digital computer. But the expectation that the machine would be the foundation of a successful British computer industry were frustrated by the peculiarly British expectation that ambitious technical developments can be sustained on a financial shoestring. Over the past four decades, the company has had several narrow escapes from catastrophe, but in the past decade has won itself an enviable reputation as an independent manufacturer of mainframe machines equipped with sophisticated software. The partnership with Fujitsu should at least keep the tradition alive.

So why should the rest of Europe be up in arms about the intended merger? The simplistic argument is that it is somehow disloyal to the concept of European unity that a strategically important manufacturer based in Europe should be controlled financially from outside. But that is a little European's view. Is it not far better that Europe should have a financially strong computer manufacturer, able to operate internationally, than that it should be saddled with an implicit obligation to protect ICL (and other European manufacturers) from outside competition? The planned merger, in short, should help to dissuade the new Europe from chauvinistic protectionism. The US Congress, about to embark on another such bout of chauvinism, would be well advised to follow suit. □

Garbage, garbage . . .

The US General Accounting Office, skilled at uncovering waste in public spending, has been beaten by garbage.

"WHAT has four wheels and fries?" quip the wags at the US General Accounting Office (GAO). "A multipurpose truck cross-hauling nonhazardous municipal solid waste and pre-prepared potato foodstuffs which, if a refrigerated unit, is in contradiction of the regulations issued by the Secretary of Transportation as instructed by the House of Representatives bill HR 3386" intone their diligent colleagues, who have spent the past nine months compiling a document that must surely rank among the most inconclusive government reports of all time.

Asked by the investigations and oversight subcommittee of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation to investigate the possibility that the practice of food/garbage cross-hauling — using the same vehicle to transport both components of the human equation — is a risk to health, the GAO has concluded that, "[w]hile federal health and food safety experts contend that the risk of food contamination from cross-hauling with garbage is relatively low . . . [w]e, along with the federal regulators and health experts, believe that current information is not adequate to rule out health risks in transporting food in these trucks". In short, the GAO report is as noncommittal as its health experts.

Each of the document's 44 pages offers a new twist in what is obviously a cunning pastiche of a scientific report. The cover sets the tone: what better title for a groundbreaking report on possible health risks than *Truck Transport: Little Is Known About Hauling Garbage and Food in the Same Vehicles*? Similarly, chapter three — the report's thundering denouement — is simply entitled "Experts Do Not Know Potential Food Contamination Risks From Cross-Hauling Garbage and Food".

But it is all too easy to underestimate the task facing the compilers of the GAO report. At the mysterious request of state officials, two of the four landfill sites at the focus of the survey were out-of-bounds to the researchers. Yet, rather than cravenly finding two other suitable landfills instead, the intrepid accountants persevered, scribbling down the licence numbers of trucks using the off-limits sites. Although they were unable to speak to either the drivers or the operators, the GAO was ultimately successful in taking a photograph of a signpost in the road outside one of these sites, an achievement described triumphantly as "Figure 2.1: Sign Outside Ohio Landfill".

Another classic example of the visual aid is Figure 3.1, which does its best to justify the report's tenuous initial claim that "transporting food in a truck that previously hauled garbage inspires high emotions in many individuals". The accompanying photograph shows a truck full of garbage, allowing the document to reach its only conclusion: "As figure 3.1 depicts, a truckload of loose garbage is a disgusting sight". □