TECHNOLOGY IN EUROPE

It is not surprising that the British Prime Minister, now dedicated to the cause of joining Britain with the European Economic Community, should be anxious to put as many apples as possible in his shop window. This, no doubt, is why Mr. Wilson described at the Lord Mayor's banquet in London a week ago his vision of how Britain could contribute uniquely to the establishment of a vigorous "technological community" in Western Europe. On the face of things, it is true, there is a contradiction between this confidence and the current belief of the British Government that Britain is desperately short of technologists, and that British industry is desperately inexpert in using what skill there is. How can a country in such bad case contribute, let alone take the lead, in the kind of enterprise Mr. Wilson has in mind? That is the question that will now be asked. The simple answer is that the question is unreasonably sceptical.

For all the gloom that there may be about the exploitation of technology in British industry, there is no doubt that the great volume of self-conscious innovation in Britain is a considerable asset. In 1962, the most recent year for which comparative statistics are available, British spending on research and development was 40 per cent of that in Western Europe as a whole. In spite of the rapid growth of activity in France in the past few years, this ratio is probably still very much the same. Tangible evidence of all this is almost as conspicuous as the Tower of London and the other symbols which appear on the travel posters. The countryside is dotted with laboratories, not all of them operated by the Government. Although academics are often quick to point out that facilities for research could be improved, and although some of them are always being tempted to the United States, it is a plain fact that research at British universities has remained vigorous and competent and has grown enormously in scale. It would be foolish of anybody to suggest that what happens in British universities is qualitatively different from—let alone better than—the research at universities elsewhere in Europe, but there is a great deal of it going on. Then British companies still make aero-engines successfully. For these and many other reasons, Mr. Wilson's talk of a European technological community should not be written off as empty dreaming.

In the long run, the benefits of technological integration in Europe could be immense, but even in the immediate future there are great gains to be made. The British and French Governments are not alone in their awareness of how much could be done to co-ordinate the development and manufacture of military equipment. Obviously there is plenty of room for wider fruitful collaboration in defence research and development, although it would be wise to remember that the scope for co-ordination of defence development will be limited so long as defence policies themselves are not fully co-ordinated. But although sensible collaboration on defence development might save money, it would not in itself create the enduring links between the participating nations which alone can give substance to the concept of a technological community. That is a more distant but a more valuable goal. The ideal is such a thorough integration of research and development within Europe that the various nations would arrange to complement each other's work, and in particular make it easy for skilled people to move easily to settle in those laboratories where they can be most usefully employed, whatever frontiers may have to be crossed in the process. How is that to be accomplished?

The place to begin is in academic and basic industrial research. Throughout Europe but especially in Britain, there is a strong tradition of government assistance for industrial research, and a great many laboratories supported by public money work on industrial problems. Informal contacts between them exist already, and there are even arrangements such as that whereby commercial companies outside Britain can become members of British collaborative research associations. The strokes of a few pens could quickly ensure that these facilities were much more fully available within Europe. Sensible but painless planning could also pick out places in which new developments could be launched on a European basis from the beginning. More effective backing for solid-state electronics is one obvious need which might be most easily satisfied in collaboration. And then there are the universities, where at present it is often easier to make links with the United States than with Europe. There is no doubt that European academic research will be enormously stimulated if people can be moved about more easily. The immediate need is money for travel and for visiting. The cost would be modest, but the long-term benefits would be incalculable, not merely in academic life but throughout science and technology. It is to be hoped that governments will not shy away from this because, like most good works, it is unspectacular.

SECRET COLLEGES END

The National Institutes of Health have acted wisely in deciding to bring the Information Exchange Groups to an end in April, for the experiment was plainly on the point of getting out of hand. The fact that the demand for enrolment has been increasing in such a way that even the generosity of the National Institutes