EUROPE

The Six or the Fifteen?

by our Paris Correspondent

The Aigrain proposals for European cooperation on seven areas of advanced technology are exercising the diplomatic skills of all governments concerned. Collaboration on computers is one of the most contentious themes.

THE more meetings there are to formulate a European policy for scientific and technical research the further away appears any decision likely to lead to any concrete outcome. The terms of reference and purpose of the meetings which are being held in Brussels are as follows: the six Common Market countries and nine other European countries (Austria, Spain, Great Britain, Norway, Denmark, Ireland, Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal) have been holding meetings of experts since April 15 this year on seven themes which could be subject to a concerted European effort. These are: computers, meteorology, oceanography, metallurgy, new methods of transport, telecommunications and pollution. The seven groups of experts, one for each theme, should be sending in their reports on June 15 of this year to the Council of Ministers of the Communities. At the same time, these reports, which will contain a general introduction by the Frenchman, Pierre Aigrain, who is coordinating the work of the seven groups, will be sent to the nine other interested governments.

Two Schools of Thought

From this date onwards the European governments of fifteen countries should be deciding on the procedure to be adopted as a result of the experts' proposals. The Six European countries should in particular be formulating the procedure to adopt to reach any decisions. Two schools of thought exist. One, suggested by Belgium and supported by Holland and Italy, proposes that a large interministerial conference representing fifteen countries should be held in July or September to review all seven reports and give a mandate to the groups of experts to carry out in-depth research on the technical and financial aspects of those activities that appear likely to lend themselves to development on a European scale.

Instead of this solemn and spectacular conference, France proposes interministerial conferences representing the fifteen countries but held separately for each of the seven themes under discussion. So far as Paris is concerned, this method has two advantages. First, for each theme it allows for immediate action on those subjects that might be the subject of multinational cooperation. Second, it avoids the necessity for laying down the bases of a technological Europe before the delicate issue of entry to the Community has been solved as regards Great Britain, Ireland, Norway and Denmark.

Disagreement on Computers

Enough of these meetings of experts have been held to allow certain original data to be gleaned. The members of the groups are technicians who are, generally speaking, favourably disposed towards European cooperation. The group chairmen are making considerable efforts to keep any obstacles to a minimum and to retain unanimity. But the upshot of this is that the reports in no way bring out the many reservations that countries have over the subjects under discussion. Computer technology is one of the most contentious themes. Here, Great Britain with ICL has a dominating position. It has proposed that there should be cooperation on two computers which have already been thoroughly researched and which could appear in 1972 and 1973 respectively. But some European countries would prefer to pool their efforts on a highly advanced computer that is scheduled to appear not earlier than 1980.

This division of opinion has been expressed in no uncertain terms by both sides, particularly by the Netherlands where Philips have stated that they will never be a sub-contractor for ICL. But the French firm CII and the Italian Olivetti, both of which know what it is to go through a period of stagnation, would be quite favourably disposed towards the English proposal. Germany is hesitant and what is worthy of note here is that from now on the German computer industry is only represented by a single body after the association of Siemens-AEG and Telefunken. As for the other countries, they would like to be associated with one of these projects but, not having much expertise of their own, are seeking formulae that might be attractive to powerful organizations such as ICL.

Diplomatic Diversions

The British experts taking part in the Brussels meetings are considered by everyone to be extremely competent and they express their opinions with the utmost clarity. They are opposed to having too many industrialists present as they do not want English firms negotiating in clandestine fashion with continental firms and therefore finding themselves faced with agreements that might in any way influence diplomatic conversations.

Generally speaking, the Six share common attitudes. Having had experience of technological cooperation (with Euratom) slotted into a deliberate policy of economic integration (with the Common Market) they are well acquainted with the main causes behind success or failure in a cooperative venture.

At the same time as the meetings of experts from the fifteen countries, the six countries of the European Economic Community are carrying on their discussions about a more limited form of cooperation on the seven themes already mentioned. Here discussions are at a more advanced stage than those of the fifteen countries. Yet there are a number of stumbling blocks. For example, France wants all the countries to be in complete agreement on their desired objectives, and has proposed clearly defined action in different sectors. Belgium, on the other hand, considers that technological cooperation should be treated as an irreducible entity and that no theme should be omitted from the programme merely on the pretext that the strong countries (that is, Germany and France) have no interest in it.