

Another unspoken and unanswered question is whether it is proper that the transition between school and university in Britain should take place, as at present, at eighteen or nineteen. Might it not be more economical as well as wiser and more suited to the needs of young people if what is called the sixth form were for most intending university students an experience lasting one or two years, not two or three, and if university courses were simultaneously lengthened from three to four? Most probably the answer would be that Mrs Margaret Thatcher, like her predecessors and probably her successors, would not sanction such a change. But there is no objective reason to think it would necessarily be more expensive while, educationally, it would almost certainly be more prudent. It may be that the best is the enemy of the good, which is why it may be wise that British education should now settle for the formula which the Schools Council and the Standing Conference on University Entrance have devised. But there is very little doubt that the proposed arrangements will pre-empt a more radical change for the best part of a decade.

France Should Not Test

THE government of France is no doubt righteously indignant that its plans for testing nuclear weapons in the Pacific have run into fierce opposition, not merely from the governments of New Zealand and Australia but from French citizens as well. For, the government of France may ask, did not the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom take advantage of testing in the atmosphere to develop their existing armouries of nuclear weapons? Does not the People's Republic of China still assume the right not to comply with the terms of the Partial Test-Ban Treaty, now nearly a decade old? What cause is there for asking that France should voluntarily forgo privileges which other nations have assumed.

The simple truth is that the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, which dates back to 1945, is a dangerous procedure whose dangers were not recognized until the mid-1950s and not acknowledged by the governments concerned until the early 1960s. But there is no doubt that if the military testing programmes of the superpowers had been begun at a time when the hazards of radioactive fallout were as widely understood as they are today, the protests would have been much more vociferous and the programmes more quickly brought to a halt. In retrospect, the existing nuclear powers may cynically be said to have been lucky that they began to develop their weapons at a time when ignorance of the consequences of radioactive fallout was widespread. (It is also, of course, fair to say that both the United States and the British governments of the 1950s did reprehensibly do much to minimize or even conceal the dangers of fallout, while the Soviet government has never openly admitted that these dangers are real.) But none of this can justify the way in which, a decade after the Partial Test-Ban Treaty, the French government now pretends that it too should enjoy the military convenience of a state of ignorance long since dispelled. The truth is that even if the series of tests now proposed by the French is numerically modest and even if the total yield of the explosions is comparatively small, there is nevertheless no doubt that the testing programme

will add to the reservoir of radioactive material in the atmosphere. Since there is every reason to think that many of the consequences of fallout are linearly related to the dose, however small it may be, the governments of all countries, not merely the governments of those in the immediate vicinity, have a right to protest at what the French government now plans.

So how should the government of France respond? The simplest and most honourable course would be to abandon the testing programme. On the face of things, such an act would also imply to outsiders that the French government's *force de frappe* was less of a strategic reality than Mr Michel Debré has been saying. In reality, however, the French government would be well advised to admit that the *force de frappe* is no more than an illusion and that its best course would be to use the protests at the proposed testing programme in the Pacific as an excuse not merely for abandoning the tests but also as a starting point for serious discussions, within the framework of the European Community, about long-term strategic defence.

What about China? The Chinese have of course been testing nuclear weapons for the best part of a decade, but only in the past year have they entered into meaningful diplomatic relationships with the rest of the world and the United Nations in particular. The first need is to make sure that the Chinese in their new role are prepared to follow the rules of diplomacy, such as they are; the experience of the past few months in the United Nations and of the bilateral negotiations with Japan and Western powers in particular have suggested that the Chinese are prepared to toe the line. So is there any reason why they should not now be asked also to comply with the spirit of the Partial Test-Ban Treaty and to abandon their own tests? The French would be on weaker ground if it were clear that the Chinese were also under pressure.

100 Years Ago



A GENTLEMAN writes us that he was invited by the Royal Commissioners to act as a juror at the Vienna Exhibition, but was at the same time coolly told that our Philistine Government had placed no funds at the disposal of the Commissioners wherewith to defray the necessary expenses of those who are willing to devote their valuable time and experience to the service of their country. Our readers will not be surprised at this. Other Governments have discovered that even in the most commercial, as well as in the highest light, the encouragement of science "pays." The British Government, with five millions on the right side of their account, still regard science as a beggarly Lazarus, to whom, for mere shame's sake, they are compelled to throw an occasional crumb. As our correspondent says, poor little Switzerland has devoted two and a half times the pittance our Government have allowed to defray the expenses of the Vienna Commission; while the amount expended by Austria in their department of former exhibitions was at least four times as much as we have devoted to theirs.

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