

## IN BRIEF

**Sea conference ends**

The latest eight-week session of the 156-nation Law of the Sea Conference ended in New York last Friday with several bitterly-debated issues still outstanding. When the next round of talks is convened at the same venue in August, subjects for further discussion will include the extent of national jurisdiction and sovereignty over economic zones, the rights of landlocked states, the most suitable form of disputes procedure, and freedom of access for scientific research—a particularly contentious area offering scope for espionage and mineral plunder, in the view of some third world nations. Nonetheless, the divergent views of the underdeveloped and industrial states have closed slightly at least on the issue of control over deep sea mineral exploitation, and a compromise solution seems within reach. As the conference ended the Soviet Union pro-

tested at recent US legislation to extend its fishing limits to 200 miles by March 1977. One view, however, is that the US move would hasten that similar unilateral action which other worried states would probably have taken anyway.

**Fluorocarbon report delayed**

A crucial report by the National Academy of Sciences on the possible effects of fluorocarbons on the ozone layer has been delayed by up to three months because of new data which suggests that the threat may not be as serious as first predicted. It seems that chlorine, liberated from fluorocarbons, in the upper atmosphere, may react with nitrates to form a moderately stable compound. If correct, the theory, which is backed up by some direct measurements, means that the reaction would provide a "sink" for destructive chlorine atoms, reducing their effect on the ozone layer substan-

tially. The Academy report, which was in the final stages of drafting when the new data came in, has been delayed until July.

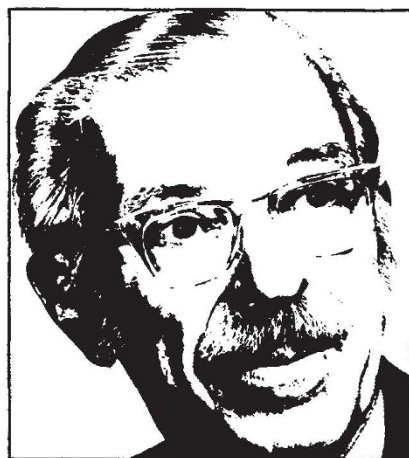
**Monitoring the stratosphere**

Spurred by the recommendations contained in February's US Government decision granting Concorde commercial access to the United States for a 16-month trial period, Britain and France have entered a joint programme with the US to monitor the stratosphere. Under the agreement, signed in Paris last week, the participants will aim to improve and extend monitoring techniques, and record long-term fluctuations in global ozone levels. The US recommendations followed concern that nitrogen oxides in supersonic aircraft exhaust might destroy stratospheric ozone through reactions like those involving fluorocarbons from aerosol sprays.

SCIENTISTS have laboured long and mightily in the past half-century to help farmers increase food production, and to identify and prevent nutritional deficiency diseases. Their efforts were so successful that a surplus of food piled up in the USA, although not in most other countries, and there was a great deal of overeating. Simultaneously, many infectious diseases ceased to be significant causes of mortality, as a result of public health measures, including immunisation, and the discovery of chemotherapeutic drugs and antibiotics. Deaths from cardiovascular disease, cancer, hypertension and other degenerative diseases went to the head of the statistical tables. It is an obvious and easy oversimplification to blame these on food because of their association with obesity, especially the cardiovascular group. But the fact that overeating leads to fatness is no reason for blaming the food rather than the gormandiser.

When the choice between guns and butter was rhetorically offered by Goebbels to the German public, little did we expect that, a few years later, butter would be placed with guns among the enemies of human beings. Yet *Nature* (April 15, page 565) wants every cow to carry a government health warning for making butterfat. The warning should be on the bathroom scales, not on the cow. The warning would be just as logically placed on every nubile woman, for human milk contains fats similar to those in cow's milk, and we are told that pre-arteriosclerotic changes can start at a very young age. I doubt that this suggestion will get very far.

In fact, when I was asked recently what foods were not under suspicion of being unsafe to eat, I could think of only one: sawdust. Fats, of course, are deadly; the saturated kind cause

**Mutiny on the Bounty**

THOMAS H. JUKES

heart disease and cancer, and the unsaturated ones destroy vitamin E. Sucrose is belaboured as being addictive and diabetogenic, except, apparently, when it occurs in orange juice (5% sucrose) and pineapple juice (8% sucrose), or when it is brown instead of white. School children who eat candy bars are being reprimanded by adults who smoke cigarettes and drink vodka on the rocks. School authorities are shutting down the vending machines, so that enterprising pupils are bootlegging soft drinks.

We eat too much protein, of

course, about twice as much as we need, and we had better feel as guilty as possible about this. The US House of Representatives just passed a bill to prevent the Food and Drug Administration from restraining the promotion of para amino benzoic acid as a vitamin, much to the joy of the "health food" stores. For if food makes you sick, vitamin pills must make you well, even non-vitamin pills that are only good for bacteria.

Food additives must go, say the consumerists, and the large companies follow suit by devising all-natural breakfast foods; nothing artificial added, no preservatives. Why let the big and growing market for "natural foods" go elsewhere? Sodium propionate stops bread from going mouldy, but it is artificial, even though it is normally present in cheese, so out it goes. Never mind the fact that some moulds produce carcinogens. Bacon is the villain, it contains nitrites, which form nitrosamines. However, more than two-thirds of the nitrites entering the average stomach come from saliva, and 86% of the nitrates, from which nitrates are formed in the mouth, come from vegetables.

Sawdust and bran alone remain, because we need more fibre to keep the bowels active, and thus prevent cancer. This is proved by the fact that there is very little cancer in Africa, where there is lots of movement. Oh, well! The English have always been preoccupied with that function, ever since the days of Beecham's Pills and Kruschen Salts.

Maybe we were better off when we counted nickels instead of calories.