

Help for computer industry

UK government plans to concentrate on electronics as part of its drive to boost exports were revealed last week. The proposal, part of the Labour government's overall 'industrial strategy', followed an announcement that the National Enterprise Board (NEB) is to become involved in the computer industry through a newly-created NEB subsidiary, INSAC Data Systems. The idea initially is to stem fragmentation in the software sector, and later to become involved in minicomputers and peripherals. The news coincides with the publication of details of a consultant's report on the European computer industry which forecasts a bleak outlook for microelectronics in the absence of a radical restructuring of the industry.

New genetics draft

The consultative document drawn up by the UK Health and Safety Commission (HSC) last August containing draft regulations for the control of genetic manipulation experiments in Britain is thought to be still under discussion with the principal scientific interests concerned.

A report appeared last week stating that the HSC's controversial all-embracing clause, requiring notification from any person carrying on "any activity intended to alter, or likely to alter" the genetic constitution of any microorganism, has now been rewritten. The new notification clause which, it was said, the HSC intended to put in its place, reads:

"No person shall carry on any activity which, by using biochemical manipulation

of extra-cellular nucleic acids, is intended or likely

- (a) to insert genetic information into organisms, and
- (b) to circumvent the natural barriers to such insertions, and
- (c) to propagate that information, unless notice has been given . . ."

This proposal, which went out before Christmas, was a new draft for comment, and does not necessarily represent the HSC's final proposed definition of genetic manipulation experiments.

Mediterranean discussions

Representatives from fifteen of the 18 nations surrounding the Mediterranean met last week in Split, Yugoslavia, to discuss proposals for combating pollution of the sea they all share. They meet again in Athens this week.

THE production of food is bound to overshadow many other human activities increasingly in years to come. Scientific agriculture is currently beset with many problems and would-be interveners. A trend in recent years has been to take away the authority of agriculturists over the methods used in agricultural production. The excuse seems to be that those who till the soil cannot be trusted either to 'protect the environment' or to produce food that is sufficiently free from 'contamination' to satisfy the ideals of consumerists.

An inevitable result of these bureaucratic machinations is an increase in the cost of producing food. The advent of a new administration in Washington has given rise to gleeful anticipation of more power by those who oppose many of the technological practices used in agriculture. Such opposition will increase the cost of food production further.

The success of scientific agriculture has made groceries so cheap and plentiful in the USA that the food supply is taken for granted. This may be attributable to the fact that food is so easily obtained that it has lost its aura of being a treasured gift of beneficent Mother Nature. The urban population, now two generations removed from farm life, knows very little about food production. As a result, consumerists, defined as individuals who are quite certain of what is best for the interests of consumerists, hold sway increasingly over consumers, who are apparently somewhat bewildered by it all.

For example, the successful campaign to cast out Red Dye No. 4 from maraschino cherries was based upon the finding that the dye produced

tumours in laboratory rodents, and a grateful populace should have thrown the deadly preserved fruit into the garbage. However, we learn that in the supermarkets there was a run on red maraschino cherries by

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hoarders who feared an impending ban.

Consumerists seem not to realise or acknowledge the basic facts of agriculture and nutrition. Some of these are that food contains substances that are toxic at high levels but are sufficiently harmless in the amounts actually present that they offer no finite hazard to health. Such substances include pesticide residues as well as other adventitious contaminants. Food can be produced without such residues, or it may in some instances be refined to remove them, as in the case of sugar.

But such finickiness, carried out to quieten the apprehensions of an opulent minority, do not fit the pattern of making an effort towards achieving abundance and low cost of food in the face of a rapidly-increasing requirement by a burgeoning global population. A few months ago, there was an uproar by consumerists over the FDA tolerances for 'filth' in foods. This was a great source of amusement to anyone who had worked on a farm, and who knew, as a fact of life, that grain and rats are constant companions. Indeed, some accident of design has made rat faeces the size and shape of wheat kernels, and hence the two items are virtually inseparable by the usual screening processes. Canned vegetables and tomatoes have always contained insect parts, more so in pesticide days.

A misapprehension in some quarters is that food of plant origin is somehow 'purer', 'closer to Mother Earth', and 'more healthy' than food derived from animal products. Actually, toxicants, including oestrogens, goitrogens, alkaloids, and fungal carcinogens, occur naturally far more often in plant foods than in animals. Domestic animals, serving as sources of meat, milk and eggs, can serve as 'filters' to metabolise and remove such substances, or to reduce their levels in the human diet. Cereal grains, of course, will continue to be the prime source of calories for human beings throughout the world. The business of feeding people must go on apace, and, to this end, let us hope that the 'Washington consumerist crowd' will not be given the opportunity to pour any more gravel in the gears that they introduced in 1976.