

should take back responsibility for the Rothschild money but still stand only on the sidelines in the support of teaching hospitals and the administration of research within the National Health Service? In agriculture, there is also a case for asking that the old boundary between "basic" and "applied" research should be made more flexible. British agriculture has been uncommonly successful in the past few decades. It might have been even more

successful if the customers and the contractors had lived more in each others' pockets. In short, if the Rothschild recipe is now to be eroded, there are the strongest reasons why the balance should be tilted the other way and the research councils given even more practical marching orders than in the recent past. If, at the same time, they can keep their links with the universities, everybody will be the beneficiary.

Ideological trouble ahead for Unesco

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) seems bent on cutting its own throat. The General Assembly of the organization just ended in Belgrade has confirmed that Unesco is no longer the high-minded arm of the United Nations concerned with the general enlightenment that recruited the late Sir Julian Huxley as its first director-general. To be sure, last month's proceedings were less sordidly political than those in the past decade when general assemblies were used by the member states as occasions for isolating Israel from Unesco's general activities. The Belgrade assembly was, rather, cynically political. On two important matters, a combination of developing countries (the "group of seventy-seven") and the Eastern bloc was able to force down the throats of the chief contributors to the Unesco budget two thoroughly bad proposals — a controversial resolution about the procedures to be used for the gathering of news throughout the world, and a scheme for the setting up of a "Special Programme" for planning the technical development of developing countries, a kind of hangover from last year's United Nations Conference on Science and Technology at Vienna. Unesco's budget is to be increased by seven per cent (in real terms) to pay for these new ventures. The industrialized Western states who are the chief contributors have to pay up or get out.

The argument about news-gathering is not merely a technical matter of how news agencies operating internationally should be regulated, but an issue of principle going to the root of Unesco's existence. For several years, developing countries have been grumbling about the unpalatable news of their affairs frequently reported by journalists and news agencies from overseas. Unesco responded by mounting a study of the problem by a commission under Mr Sean McBride, a retired Irish diplomat. The McBride report has been a focus of controversy for the past two years, principally because it gave developing countries reason to believe that they are indeed exploited, and even dealt with unfairly, by the international news agencies. So, the argument goes, there must be a "new information order" to match the "new economic order" for which developing countries (with some justice) have been asking for several years. At Belgrade last month, Unesco was given until 1983 to work out the principles on which such a regime should be based.

But why should this be a black mark for Unesco? Surely the gathering of information is properly within the organization's terms of reference? And surely it is right and proper that it should respond to the wishes of the majority of its members? That is the defence of what Unesco is about. These arguments are nevertheless too facile. They entirely overlook the dangers of admitting that governments have a right to expect news of a kind that is welcome, even flattering. The enterprise on which Unesco is embarked also carries explicit approval for the notion that governments should properly be concerned with the management of the means by which news of their own doings is relayed to the wider world. The fear is that governments will use the Unesco resolution as an excuse for telling journalists what they should say.

It is, of course, well known that member governments differ in their estimation of these dangers. Many socialist states take the view, logical enough, that the gathering of information and its dissemination plays such an important role in society that governments must shoulder the responsibility. Most Western governments, with more or less enthusiasm, follow the opposite principle that a free press is a necessary guarantee of personal

freedom and thus of a just society. The governments of developing countries differ among themselves. Some hanker after the Eastern way but lack the facilities. Others — India is perhaps the most creditable example — put up with a free press without too much complaint. Wherever the truth lies (and there is not much doubt of that), the difference is frankly ideological. By backing one side and not the other, Unesco's members have unwisely — some would say foolishly — committed the organization to an ideological position in a way that must surely conflict with its high-minded principles.

Unesco's special programme for redressing the technical balance between the developing and the industrialized countries of the world is similarly born of ideology. Again, there is no complaint that the topic is outside the organization's terms of reference. Nor is it denied that there is an urgent need of more and of more effective technical and financial assistance for the developing countries of the world. There is yet a chance that the message of the Brandt Commission's study will sink in (see *Nature* 21 February). It does not, however, follow that the nostrums that preoccupied the Vienna conference last year would have been effective even if they had been approved (which they were not), that the notion of a "new technological order", ill-defined as it is, makes any sense and that a specially created Unesco secretariat, politicized as it would be, would be competent to define a strategy for the future. It is not, in any case, as if the United Nations system is short of organizations for fostering technical and economic development. Within its special terms of reference, Unesco might have done a useful job by helping to bring about a better understanding of the sharp differences of opinion that abound on the proper relationship between developed and developing countries on science and technology. By plumping for the solution of the new technological order, the majority of Unesco's members have jet again put ideology before good sense.

Unesco is not well placed to take such risks. Over the years, it has won itself an unenviable reputation for unreality, extravagance and maladministration. Some good things have come out of the splendid Corbusier building in the Place de Fontenoy. Unesco helped to focus interest on Abu Simbel and on the hydrology of Venice. Its efforts to encourage innovation in science teaching and the systematization of scientific bibliographies have been well meaning but not sufficiently energetic to make a mark in competition with other free-wheeling agencies. Other projects, the so-called "Biosphere" programme for example, have been chiefly valuable as sources of largely empty generalizations. It is no wonder that people (and member governments) increasingly ask whether it can be worth its cost.

Unesco would be better placed to run ideological risks if it were less open to complaint about the ordinary conduct of its affairs. The chances are that most of the disaffected Western governments will react to the troubles at Belgrade by resolving to pay more attention to Unesco's business in the years immediately ahead. Few of them would wish, at this stage, to incur the opprobrium of taking the initiative to cut it down to size or even to put it to sleep. But things could change — as the United States Congress will change in January. Unesco may yet find itself in the uncomfortable position of the International Labour Organization, which has not yet recovered from the withdrawal of the United States three years ago. It would be unfortunate, but no by any means the end of the world, if Unesco were to find itself in a similar position. The remedy is in its own hands.