

“Freeze” frenzy hits US

Does the public demand for a nuclear weapons “freeze” reflect a basic shift of opinion?

Enthusiasm for a freeze on the production of nuclear weapons is sweeping the United States. Rallies and teach-ins abound, with participants waving pictures of Hiroshima victims and charts of death from “limited” bomb blasts. Students and faculty on many campuses are involved. So are physicians. Even in the southern states, which was fairly unmoved by the Vietnam protests, freeze frenzy is taking hold.

The movement has been accompanied by pronouncements from prominent people calling on the Reagan Administration to stop its weapons build-up, and blaming the arms control and national security community for giving the public gobbledygook and no results for its 20 years of effort. Historian Barbara Tuchman, whose ability to understand the intricacies of history has won her two Pulitzer prizes, threw up her hands in pages of the *New York Times* recently and confessed that “the subject of nuclear arms control . . . is virtually incomprehensible to the layman”. She showed how arms control has failed since the beginning of the century. Meanwhile, Yale psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has blamed the intellectual community for not doing enough. “This central issue of our times has been fundamentally ignored in the universities”, he said at a recent conference jointly sponsored by two education groups and Hobart and William Smith College. The failure of leaders and the security community was bemusedly outlined in public recently by a former participant, Roger Molander who after years working on nuclear arms control in the White House quoted a presidential science adviser as saying, of the leaders’ behaviour “where are the grownups?” Molander quit and founded “Ground Zero”, a grass-roots organization that has been remarkably successful in sparking rallies around the land.

Are we witnessing a fundamental shift in US opinion? Europe is watching it closely, particularly the European peace movement, which is hoping that it will dissuade the Administration from its hawkishness, and perhaps tip the balance against NATO plans to install new missiles in Europe.

But the shift may not be fundamental. It is caused by two things, both of which can change quite soon. First, the President and Mr Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, and other officials, have been saying things in public that previous Administrations were wise enough to avoid. They have talked openly, and casually about the likelihood of nuclear war, the “fact” of Soviet military superiority, the need for a gargantuan, apparently ceaseless weapons build-up, and they have appeared patently insincere about arms control. By escalating public discourse, clearly they are upsetting people.

The second cause of the freeze frenzy is the volatility of public opinion itself, which is now swinging back from its hawkish mood of recent years. The last time a serious arms control plan was presented to the public, SALT II in 1979 and 1980, they were clearly bored. Then the humiliation in Iran, and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, sparked a conservative trend which eventually brought Reagan to office. If the public is asking why, today, there is not sufficient arms control, it has itself, in part, to blame.

European peace movements should realize how different the American freeze movement is. The US demonstrators seem not too concerned about the proposed emplacement of Pershing and cruise missiles in Europe — the 1979 NATO decision which Europe’s peace movement wants reversed. To the Americans, those Pershing and cruise missiles are small fry compared with Reagan’s plans for the MX missile and an apparently ceaseless parade of giant aircraft carriers, submarines, nuclear-armed B-1 and Stealth bombers, and the like which the American movement seeks to freeze. Nor is the neutron bomb a major US issue. The two movements have not fused, although some major gaffe by the Reagan Administration could yet cause it to happen.

And Americans should question whether their intellectuals are

to blame — whether, as Lifton grandly said, “a generation of scholarship has been lost” — whatever that means. To blame the arms control and national security intellectuals for the military build-up in the world is like blaming social scientists for the persistence or racism, poverty, and violence. True, one of the vanities of intellectuals is that they think that by studying a subject, they can control it. But not even scientists can do that. William Perry, former Under-Secretary for Defense Research and Engineering, and one of the key defence intellectuals who tried to “sell” SALT II for the Carter Administration, says there is “some merit” in the view that US defence intellectuals have failed the country. But it was the public’s fault too, he notes “very little else at the time (besides SALT II) was guaranteed to put the public to sleep”. Perry welcomes the freeze movement — although he disagrees with some of its aims. “As a leader in an Administration I would rather work with an aroused public, and try to channel that interest, than have to try to convince an apathetic public.”

It would be unwise for the Reagan Administration to view the freeze frenzy as a suspect foreign import, festering on US university campuses, and accuse its adherents of lack of patriotism. While the movement has set itself against the Administration’s arms build-up, it would clearly be delighted by any presidential move to talk seriously about arms control with the Soviet Union. For the first time in years arms control is gaining a public constituency in the United States. It is too bad that SALT II is not before the Senate, so that the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union, could benefit from it.

Hasty abolition

Disappearance of the Schools Council was predicted, but may have been unwise.

The British Secretary of State for Education and Science, Sir Keith Joseph, is plainly an abolitionist by temperament (see preceding page). Hankerings to get rid of the Social Science Research Council are one thing. Last week, however, he abolished the Schools Council, an organization set up in Britain in the 1960s in the hope of overcoming some of the obstacles to national planning in British schools education. For in Britain, as elsewhere, the central government has no direct authority over teachers in local schools, who are employed by and responsible to their local education authorities. The result is that the curriculum can vary enormously from one place to another; school leaving examinations can differ in stringency from one examinations board to another; and in principle there is no reason why some local authorities should not give their schools entirely eccentric marching orders. The problem of bridging this gap has daunted many governments and yet is politically insoluble — the local authorities in Britain would not sacrifice such independence that they retain in this small area of their operations.

The Schools Council was designed principally as a talking shop, a place where central government, local government and independent people could be represented and in which, tacitly at least, local authorities and the central government would come to some understanding on education policy. What has gone wrong is that the Schools Council’s procedures have become cumbersome and the council itself has been politicized by the conflicting interests it represents, often those of a teachers’ labour union. At the same time, the original plan to bring about some coherence in British schools education by advising novel and more stimulating curricula has been defeated by the shortage of funds and, to some extent, by the apathy of the schools. The Schools Council has in the past few years been a sitting duck, ripe for abolition. Sir Keith Joseph has done this deed and now plans to replace the Schools Council by two advisory bodies, one for the curriculum and one for examinations. The snag is that these advisory bodies will not, by their constitution, bring central and local government together. When he is more experienced in his present post, Sir Keith Joseph will regret this.