

the worst will have access to means of verifying the facts of what may seem a threatening development and then of coming to an understanding of why that development has taken place.

The obvious mechanism is to arrange that a complainant government should have the right to question any other about its intentions, ideally as part of some framework of regular meetings. The trouble is that there will be natural limits on the frequency with which awkward questions may be raised arising from political considerations and even from the unwillingness of governments implicitly to disclose the weaknesses of their intelligence networks. So why not replicate for the monitoring of Europe a system comparable with the nuclear safeguards inspectorate, which in the past decade has made the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty work without substantial complaint? The result, it is true, would be yet another international body staffed by international civil servants, but the value of such an organization would far outweigh not merely its cost but the irritation it would no doubt cause. Moreover, because such a body of inspectors, individually nationals of member states but collectively impartial, would serve as a model for the supervisory authority there would have to be in any more ambitious programme for transparency in Europe than that now planned, its creation would be a more important gain than any other agreement that could be quickly reached at Stockholm.

Mercifully, such an arrangement would also fit in well with the growing belief, at least in Western Europe, that safety from the threat of all-out war cannot much longer be left to the two principal nuclear powers. Little benefit would result from a broadening of the basis of the negotiations on nuclear arms which have broken down at Geneva, which is not to say that the British and French nuclear forces are irrelevant. For if two powers fail to reach agreement, the chances that four (or even five, with China) would do so must be smaller. Yet the construction of some international mechanism for supervising the movement of soldiers and their equipment (and in due course of counting stockpiles?) would go a long way to satisfy European governments that they have a voice in matters which affect them vitally, but over which they have no direct control. □

Pork-barrel supplement

The US Administration hopes to spend more on competitive grants in agriculture. It must insist.

THE word has gone out from those within the Reagan Administration who support competitive grants for agriculture that good news is coming at the end of the month, when the President will release his budget proposals for fiscal year 1985 (see p.204). The competitive grants programme in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been held to a ludicrously low level — \$17 million — by political interests which see perfection in the century-old share-the-wealth system that passes for an agricultural research structure in the United States. Every state gets a piece of the action, no questions asked. Congressmen pat themselves on the back for bringing home the goodies. And mediocre researchers continue to grind away at the same old applied technology that might have made sense once upon a time.

The message has finally begun to sink in, however, that questions must be asked if agricultural research is to remain in touch with twentieth-century science. USDA is said to have asked for \$50 million for competitive grants for 1985. The obstacle now appears to be the Office of Management and Budget, which is thought to have ensured that only half of that request will see its way to the budget. The administration last year proposed \$21 million, which Congress cut back to \$17 million — the same level as for years past. The route to real change is not easy. The administration will have to battle with entrenched interests in Congress, particularly one Representative Jamie Whitten of Mississippi, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and a stalwart defender of mediocrity when it is in the interest of his home state. A half-hearted effort by the administration will not do. It will have to have the courage of its newly-found convictions. □

Examination fever

British school education is in for another shake-up. The minister in charge should move carefully.

SIR Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, has been in his job for what by British standards is a suspiciously long time. Even if the explanation is that there is nowhere else in the government for him to go, the consequence is beneficial. Familiarity with the educational system he administers has now led Sir Keith into a radical reappraisal of how the job should be done. At a conference in Sheffield earlier this month, he announced that his department plans to establish objectives for the main parts of the school curriculum in British schools for children aged from five to sixteen. By doing so, he has issued the most important challenge so far to the doctrine underlying the 1944 Education Act — that central government pays for the cost of public schooling, that local education authorities administer schools and influence the curriculum as they can — but that the final arbiters of what is taught are teachers.

This doctrine has increasingly become a fiction in the past four decades. Teachers have done the best they could in a quickly changing world, but have been given too little opportunity to keep up with what they hope to teach. Local education authorities have sometimes done what they could to help, but their performance has been patchy. Bodies such as the Schools Council, conceived of as an instrument for curriculum development but now demolished, have spent too much of their energy on procedure and not enough on content. Central government has had to be content with seeking to influence the system by the reports of advisory committees appointed for special purposes or by the much diminished influence of its inspectors. So, by default, the school curriculum has in effect been determined by the uniquely British examination system. That, it seems, is the discovery which Sir Keith has now made and the circumstance that he seeks to change. The result could be invaluable, especially in the teaching of science.

As things are, much of the British public is not merely ignorant of even the most basic science but actively suspicious of it. Science is often regarded as a necessary evil that will corrupt the minds of children as they lose the innocence of youth, but that children of primary school age should be exposed to such adult material, heaven forbid, seems quite shocking. Even at secondary level, the notion persists that science is an eccentric pastime or, even more demeaning, a vocational pursuit, — a device to enable clever children to pass difficult examinations but remote from the concerns of everyday life. Such effete-ness has persisted because, astonishingly, it has never been thought necessary in Britain to specify the basic concepts and information about the world that the school system should aim to teach. Science, while widely taught, is not an essential part of every student's education. Now that may change.

Sir Keith Joseph's intention seems to be to determine what is taught in British schools by reforming the examinations system. There can be no sensible objection to such an attempt, except perhaps the government's desire at the same time to find short-term economies in public expenditure. The argument that teachers should be allowed to adapt their teaching to local needs is no objection, being an obvious truth and not an alternative. That an education system paid for by the British taxpayer should conform with nationally agreed objectives is self-evident.

Yet as things stand, the system does nothing of the sort. At secondary school level, the curriculum is hagridden by examinations. As things are, there are two tiers of school-leaving examinations, one for those seeking places at universities called A ("advanced") level and taken at age eighteen or thereabouts, and a second layer of two examinations at sixteen, called O (for "ordinary") level and CSE (for "Certificate of Secondary Education") respectively. Three years ago, the government agreed to follow its predecessor's undertaking that the examinations at sixteen would be combined, but the details are still being worked out.