

## Last high-noon for UNESCO

*The British government seems determined to pull out of UNESCO. Here is a last-minute plea that it should change its mind. But UNESCO's problems will remain.*

THE fine Corbusier building in Paris inhabited by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) is not noticeably upset by the prospect that the United Kingdom may cease to be a member at the end of the year (three weeks from now). After all, the least successful of the UN's agencies has just returned from a conference at Sofia at which it seemed to make concessions to its critics, and gained the impression that some of them had been silenced. After the departure of the United States (responsible for 30 per cent of the 1984 budget), which seems to have left most things unchanged, how can the defection of the United Kingdom (with its mere 7 per cent) shake the edifice substantially? The simple answer is that the present time is a lull before a storm. UNESCO is going to have to change, not merely because of the complaints against it but from necessity. The strongest argument why the British government should not now pull out is that, if it stays, it has a good chance of being showered with the plaudits that will be showered on the reformers.

A still better reason for staying in is that there is much to do. UNESCO's errors are mostly errors of commission. It has tilted at impossible windmills, such as the objective of bringing about a new world information order (a device for making sure that governments are never offended by what their newspapers publish). Yet UNESCO has also done good works, it remains, for example, the only substantial source of support for the International Council of Scientific Unions. By any standards, a programme composed of such a mixture of the impossibly utopian and the practically utilitarian cannot but be endearing. The challenge, and the task that will remain even if Britain leaves, is to hammer this programme into shape.

For all its outward toughness about UNESCO, even the British government has not faced the central error in UNESCO's way of doing business, the generally accepted belief that the organization is meant to play a decisive part in the development of developing countries. Mr Timothy Raison, the British Foreign Office minister responsible for overseas aid (and for UNESCO), who has been sympathetically hard-headed on British membership over the past year, fell into the familiar trap in his speech during the House of Commons debate on UNESCO last month. Get those civil servants out of Paris, and into the Field, is the cry. The reality is that there are half a dozen other UN agencies whose terms of reference enjoin them explicitly to assist development, and whose budgets are more nearly commensurate with the task. A large part of UNESCO's difficulty over the past few years is that the majority of its members (developing countries) have insisted that it should become another aid agency, and that its paymasters (governments like the British) have weakly fallen in with the proposal.

By all accounts, the same error was repeated at last week's meeting of the British National Commission for UNESCO, the representative body of the great and the good which the government feels compelled to consult (but not compelled to listen to) at times like these. Most voices spoke for UNESCO's further transformation into a lowly version of, say, the Rockefeller Foundation that would remain hamstrung by its constitution, and by the need to deal equally with all of its constituents. The need for development, as this year's experience in most of Africa has all too plainly shown, is too urgent to be safely

neglected for much longer. But that, unfortunately, does not imply that UNESCO, already driven far off course, should be thrown ineffectually into the battle. The scale of its operations is simply too small to make much difference. But equally, it is not necessary that UNESCO should continue indefinitely to be the chief source of support for worthy organizations such as the International Council of Scientific Unions, which could (and should) keep itself alive by means of contributions from its members. UNESCO needs most of all to discover what it is for, and to pursue those goals wholeheartedly.

What might be done? It is not so long since UNESCO claimed to be an important influence in the teaching of science and technology in schools. It retains some influence in that field, spending modest sums on useful good works such as the design and manufacture of school science equipment, notably through its centre at the University of Delhi. But UNESCO has never had the nous to appreciate the generality of the difficulties of science teaching, the simple truth that rich countries such as the United States are as perplexed as the poorest among the UN's members. That is a field that a reformed UNESCO would plough. And why not extend the same principles both to other parts of the curriculum of the young?

In short, UNESCO's programmes should be devised to span problems within its terms of reference (education, science and culture) which are common to its members, not the exclusive concern of the poorest among them (or of any other class). Among present programmes, that to catalogue and, if possible, to preserve sites of archaeological or cultural importance to the international community is a good model for what might be done (if a poor model for administration). In the past, UNESCO has similarly helped to reach compromises between the rich and poor countries on questions such as copyright, where the trick has been to reconcile conflicting interests. There are many other issues of this kind that need attention, but which will not be attended to if too many UNESCO members quit.

That is the prize the British government should stay to help to achieve. There are few who would not accept its view that UNESCO as it stands is a badly administered can of worms which, by its reputation, does more harm than good to the cause of international cooperation. The obvious difficulty is that, if UNESCO should now collapse, it would not be reinvented within the lifetime of anybody now alive. Yet the tasks that cry out to be tackled are too important to wait that long, while the shocks to UNESCO of the past two years provide an opportunity that will not soon recur. □

## Changing of the guard

*The Royal Society has a new president, but it may also need a new policy.*

SIR Andrew Huxley, who retired last weekend as president of the Royal Society, has predictably done a splendid job during the past five years. Undemonstratively temperate, almost the opposite of a power-seeker, his capacity (and liking) for intellectual work has enabled Britain's best known society to enhance its reputation for giving advice that cannot be ignored. During his spell in office, Sir Andrew has also emerged (again