

troubles if the scientific community had been more vigilant in its defence of its own interests in the past eight years.

So what should be done about CERN? The British government, which has taken the decision into its own hands, had better move carefully. The decision not to participate in the European manned spaceflight programme may have been justifiable, but pulling out of CERN would be an entirely different matter even if the funds involved are smaller. For CERN has a unique place in the brief history of European collaboration. Quite apart from its accomplishments in high-energy physics as such, it has been one of the few models of a technique for international collaboration in which members' contributions are used to support the projects judged to be the most worthwhile, whatever the nationality of those who mount them.

No doubt CERN is expensive compared with what it would be elsewhere; it is, after all, mostly in Switzerland. No doubt there are also ways in which CERN's operations could be simplified and cheapened. But the British government will deserve all the scorn it will earn from other European governments if it plays its cards next week in a way that will mire CERN in a long wrangle about budgets, or in an artificial attempt to divide what is a unified programme of research into separable parts, with the intention then of opting out of some of them. Far better to pull out and shut up. Better still to agree to pay the subscription, but to make no promises about the degree to which British high-energy physics will be able to use the facilities at Geneva in the years immediately ahead. The reputation for niggardliness the British government has earned for itself in European research circles during recent years derives from its consistent failure to soften its habit of saying NO with an endorsement of the reasons for believing collaboration in research to be worthwhile; playing tactical games at next week's council meeting will be folly.

Either course would leave British high-energy physics in suspended animation, which would be ironical for the country in which Ernest Rutherford did most of his work. But that is the lesser evil. Indeed, it goes without saying that even if British membership of CERN continues, high-energy physics will win declining support until the research councils' own affairs are reorganized or until the government agrees that they should be compensated financially for the extra responsibilities they have undertaken in the past few years. It is natural that people who wish to play a part in the exciting developments that lie ahead in high-energy physics should be angered at the prospect that they may be excluded from them because their natural sponsors do not have the funds. But if that is how it emerges, they may the more effectively bend their energies to the improvement of the present state of affairs. □

US dollars for sale

The US government is occupied with the summit, but should also worry urgently about the dollar.

THE US administration, preoccupied this week with arms control, seems to have very little time or intellectual energy to spare for the more urgent crisis it should be tackling, the crumbling of the US dollar. Although the administration and the Congress did scramble together an outline scheme for reducing this year's budget deficit by the deadline of 20 November, the package was predictably unconvincing (see *Nature* 330, 193; 1987) to the international financial markets, not least because the Congress has yet to turn its agreement with the White House into legislation, and may yet renege on the deal. The consequence is that the value of the US dollar has fallen even further on the foreign exchanges. Since the beginning of this year, the average value of the dollar against the currencies of its trading partners has declined by 30 per cent, and would have fallen even further if the central banks of Japan and West Germany had not been buying dollars on the exchanges, incurring huge losses in the process. Yet the US administration shrinks from the inter-

national bankers' meeting which can alone bring stability to the system, partly from fear of congressional backsliding and partly because it wants to wait for some good news — perhaps an improvement of the trade imbalance — to suggest that the dollar has found its natural floor.

The danger in waiting for something to turn up is that it will accentuate the risk of a damaging upheaval in the world's economic system. The effects of the stock market crash beginning on 19 October have yet to become apparent in the United States, where the prospects of a recession will depend on the extent to which the inevitable but unknown reduction of domestic demand is counterbalanced by an increase of the export trade. The longer the uncertainty persists, the greater is the chance that the funds the Federal Reserve continues to pump into the US economy will show up in 1988 as inflation, with the uncomfortable consequences that will bring both in the United States and elsewhere, notably among the army of US creditors overseas. But the decline of the dollar has almost certainly gone far enough to give US exporters the extra edge they need to set the trade balance right. While there may be some in Washington who calculate that letting matters lie for a little while will soon persuade people elsewhere that cheap dollars are a good investment, that is too great a risk to take with the world's economy. It is just as likely that a continuation of the present state of affairs will merely force economic activity elsewhere to decline. It would be far preferable that the United States should do now what will at some point be necessary — to bridge the gap that lies ahead either by borrowing from its trading partners' central banks or by raising funds itself by selling debt denominated in yen and deutschmarks to the world at large. □

Academics should strike

Reasoned protests may be less effective than mass defection from government committees.

SHOULD British academics now go on strike? That is the question obviously prompted by one of the most explicit academic protests so far at the Education Reform Bill the British government published two weeks ago and plans to force through parliament. Last week Sir John Kingman, now vice-chancellor of the University of Bristol, but chairman of the Science and Engineering Research Council until 18 months ago, explained to his university court how the arrangements in the bill will destroy "once and for all, the present limited independence of the universities". He is right. The bill provides that the funds supplied to universities may have strings attached, and that the government may direct what those strings shall be (*Nature* 330, 299; 1987). If the government protests, in the debates that lie ahead, that it does not intend to use the provisions to undermine the residual independence of the universities, it should be asked why it has provided its successors with a means of doing just that.

Whether these provisions will be amended will depend on what happens to the bill in the House of Lords and, then, the House of Commons. Unless pure reason persuades the government that these provisions are mistaken, it can eventually insist on its chosen course. Curiously, however, the government will be relying throughout this period, and afterwards, on the willing services of British academics to help in administering British higher education, first preparing it for the slaughter and then arranging that the administration of the butchered corpse should be "cost-effective". What the government is asking is reminiscent of how the managers of concentration camps call on their intended victims for help. If British academics have any pride left (but the indignities of the past few years may have robbed them of it), they should now deny the government the help they need. A rapid thinning of the ranks of the University Grants Committee, destined for oblivion, would be appropriate, but there are many other government committees from which academics should promptly resign. □