

on imports from Japan while others have persuaded Japanese motor manufacturers to accept 'voluntary' quotas on their exports. From time to time, European governments use more devious means to prevent their people from buying Japanese goods: the French government's diversion for 'inspection' of imported video-recorders to warehouses in provincial Poitiers remains a triumph of ingenuity among non-tariff restraints on trade — but, as events have shown, an ineffectual one. EC's more formal restriction of the import of Japanese goods by anti-dumping measures are even less easily justifiable and should be, as Japan asks, adjudicated by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). This is the small change of bad international relations, but worrying at the outset of the European drive for self-cohesion.

That is the incentive for a study (now published) by the Select Committee on the European Communities of the British House of Lords. When, in the early 1970s, soon after British membership of EC, it became plain that the spate of European regulation and legislation would overwhelm the House of Commons, Lord Ashby (previously Eric Ashby, researcher and academic) persuaded his fellow-peers that the House of Lords should scrutinize European legislation instead. If the British government had taken the committee's advice on pollution standards, it might not now find itself compelled to meet European standards for the purity of drinking water while trying to sell the British water-supply industry to private shareholders. Now the committee has taken up the question of Europe's relations with Japan, using a somewhat narrow-minded document produced by the European Commission last year as its starting-point.

What the committee says is familiar, but none the less sobering. First, it offers an accurate diagnosis of why Europe is at a competitive disadvantage with respect to Japan in the trade for high-technology consumer goods: the Japanese manufacture goods of better quality and reliability which are innovative enough to command the pocket-books of customers. On the management of the awkward trading relationship that results, the committee argues forcefully that the European Commission should take the issue firmly in hand, abolishing the present patchwork of national and Community-wide restriction and, if necessary, applying (as is allowed) to GATT for temporary protection for vulnerable industries. The present mixture of arrangements is a recipe for contention.

For Europeans, the chilling part is the explanation of Japan's success. The quality of Japan's public education persuades one British industrialist that many of Japan's production-line workers would be welcome in his development laboratories. The information that large Japanese manufacturers regularly spend 15 per cent of their turnover on research and development is not new, but is probably the most direct demonstration of how science and technology can create prosperity: *per capita* Gross Domestic Product in Japan, which now exceeds that in the United States by 16 per cent, is two-thirds greater than in EC as a whole. In passing, the committee

notes that the Commission's applied research programmes, devised in part to simulate the pre-competitive research collaboration in which Japanese companies engage, are nowhere near as effective. The committee also flirts with the superficial notion of 'catching up', but understandably without conviction. The challenge for Europe is how to strike a better balance. □

Games British play

The re-organization of British civil science seems destined to come about, but only with difficulty.

QUITE why a radical proposal that five British research councils should be rolled together into one have, just now, been taken up with gusto is a matter for conjecture (see *Nature* 339, 645; 29 June 1989). Is it that the ticking of some biological clock has reminded the British that it is a long time now since the reorganizations of 1962 (Trend), 1971 (Rothschild) and the onset of the past decade's slow attrition of 1981? But nobody in Britain expects Rome to be built or even dismantled in a day. Last week's meeting of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) leaves the most important details to be settled. Meanwhile, the chairman of the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), Dr E.W.J. (Bill) Mitchell, has circulated to his staff a document which is at once a defence against some of the criticism in the Morris report that triggered the present interest in reorganization and a cogent argument for reorganization.

All public grant-making organizations are necessarily anomalous. Their function is to disburse public money for research, but they depend primarily for expertise on the researchers who depend on them — the members of the committees who sift through research-grant applications. Mitchell is right to argue in his letter that SERC has been unfairly blamed for the turf-battle with the Medical Research Council (MRC) over the no-man's-land of biotechnology. He might have added that SERC has also won an enviable reputation for fairness among its dependants. This journal's complaint is that it should be trying harder to spend more of its income on untied research in universities. That could be easier if the five research councils were united, but he is right that such an arrangement would be nonsense if one council (MRC is the reluctant partner) is allowed to stay outside.

The solution, for ABRC and the British government, is to finesse these difficulties by experiment. Hitherto, reorganization has been taken to imply the abolition of the present structure and its replacement by another. Why not instead make the chairman of ABRC a full-time executive for the management of civil science, make the council into a source of strategic advice and let the research councils work out the best way of living with each other productively? That way, the utility of reorganization would be tested against need. Too many of the reorganizations of the past have been nullified by their abstractness. □