

(which killed eleven British Marine bandmen last week) as a bunch of freedom fighters. But, in reality, neither side would welcome the reality of those movements in the world that the arms-control agreements now in prospect are likely to create. The trick they must next pull off is to share the other's view of what constitutes good government. Necessarily, that will be more difficult than mere arms control. □

Defensive business

The failure of a British company's investment in a US business should be followed by more general reform.

SINCE the beginning of the year, the British Ministry of Defence has been brooding on the question of whether the General Electric Company (no relation of GE) and Siemens of West Germany should be allowed to buy the electronics, telecommunications and defence company called Plessey. Throughout, the ministry has been comforted by knowing that even if two of its chief electronics contractors merged, competition would remain because of the continued independence of Racal and Ferranti, the second of which, despite its reputation for daring, has a solid reputation in avionics. But no longer. Hardly had Plessey been taken over than Ferranti was in trouble.

The circumstances are bizarre, but also raise important questions about the role of modern contractors. Ferranti's troubles stem from its purchase more than a year ago (for £360 million) of the US defence contractor International Signal and Control (ISC). Ferranti's objective was to buy its way into a more substantial (and presumably more profitable) defence business than the British government offered. Eighteen months went by before it emerged that ISC does not, as it had claimed, enjoy the benefits of contracts worth between £150 million and £200 million with governments outside the United States. Ferranti's bankers have bridged the gap, but only temporarily; eventually, it will probably be sold.

The important public issue is that ISC appears not to have been one company, but two. Like all other public companies, it had a publicly acknowledged board of directors. But because much of its work was technically secret, there was a parallel 'proxy' board, one of whose members was (and still is) the much-respected ex-admiral "Bobby" Inman. The idea seems to have been that the latter, with the benefit of the appropriate security clearances, would talk technicalities to the Pentagon and other customers, presumably directing technical operations as well, while the public board would worry about matters that more usually concern directors — cash flow, the share price, corporate and public relations. Nobody (not even Ferranti) seems to have appreciated that such a division of responsibility, itself a violation of the principles of a joint-stock company, is also a recipe for not being able to tell who is responsible when things go wrong. It is a pity that Ferranti should have had to pay such a heavy price for demonstrating such a simple truth. □

We're all Greens now

If British Greens in conference last week are anything to go by, the Green movement has a problem of consistency.

LARGELY because of the continuing schism between the two British centre parties, the British Green party did better than anybody (itself included) expected at the British elections to the European Parliament in the summer. It is, of course, a familiar *canard* to say that Greens do not know what they want: the truth is that their wants are clearly articulated. But the British Green party's conference last week at Wolverhampton (a distant north-western suburb of Birmingham) seems merely to have confirmed that Greens' wants are a self-contradictory collection of yearnings for a different world that cannot constitute a political programme, but which may yet win votes.

Last week's conference reached largely predictable decisions. Nuclear power stations, for example, were condemned. So, too, was nitrate in drinking water, as were pesticides anywhere. Congestion on the roads could be made to disappear by levying sufficiently heavy charges on the vehicles using them. And so on. As the week went by, it became plain that it is unfair to call the British Green party a single-issue party; rather, it is a multi-issue party, an umbrella beneath which the discontents of all individual members can be accommodated. It is a party of the malcontent. Comparisons with the defunct French Poujadistes (who wanted not to pay taxes) are natural, and not misplaced.

It will be a great misfortune if the new 1990s' wave of environmentalists is too much enmeshed in doings such as these. In an environment more beneficent (at least for people) than ever before, there remain a few important environmental problems (such as AIDS and the possibility that the greenhouse effect will take effect) and a multitude of environmental threats less damaging to people (but not necessarily less threatening to other species), most of them consequences of human activities made possible by increased prosperity. Last week's Greens seem not to have bothered with the distinction.

In reality, all electable political parties have to square a tricky circle: they have to persuade those who vote for them that certain goals (AIDS and the greenhouse effect, say) are paramount and that others are matters on which people must be prepared to compromise. It is, for example, entirely possible that future governments in Europe and North America will find themselves having to relax drinking water standards so as to pay for capital investments needed to combat the greenhouse effect. And how much will Greens be prepared to pay to buy out last week's declaration by four southern African governments that they will continue to allow the trade in elephant ivory? Faced with such dilemmas, on last week's showing, the British Green party would promptly fall apart. □