

complaint is self-serving, the defence of inefficient management. But what this second tumble on Wall Street shows is that the short-term calculations of the financial communities that there is more profit in the junk bond market and other expedients for making money than in industrial investment are somehow mistaken. The West being what it is, the only long-term remedy must be to provide incentives for productive industrial investment. Then, there would be more financial securities to soak up people's savings, so that stock market prices would settle at more realistically low levels, while interest rates would decline with people's expectations of what constitutes a sustainable return on their investments. But that halcyon dream is separated from the present by the huge uncertainties of the weeks that lie ahead. □

## Agricultural contest

The US Department of Agriculture should respond to a plea to fund research competitively, but with guile.

ALTHOUGH it is high time that an influential body such as the National Research Council (NRC) complained that the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) should spend its research funds more intelligently (see page 561), it should not be surprised if its arguments fail to be reflected in the shape of the federal budget. There have been some occasions in the past forty years when the department itself has been persuaded that it should change its ways, these have never coincided decisively with occasions when the Congress is prepared to sanction change. The stumbling-block is always that the Congress, but sometimes also USDA itself, seems to be persuaded that spending more on competitive research grants would be the death of the traditional way of channelling funds to US universities — the hallowed but often abused system of land-grant colleges.

It need not be like that at all. The land-grant system, originally a scheme for stiffening the agricultural extension services intellectually, is rightly respected throughout the world. The original calculation was that the generous endowment of agriculture and related departments at universities, and the creation of links with federal and state extension services, would give the United States a productive and resilient agricultural economy. No disrespect of USDA's own research establishments is implied by the acknowledgement that the original calculations were accurate. US agriculture is indeed the most productive in the world.

That is the good news. The other side of the coin is that times have changed and that, among the agricultural establishments of the land-grant colleges, some have turned out to be better than others. While nobody can fault, for example, the University of California at Davis for its eagerness to seize on new techniques such as those suggested by molecular biology, others are still rather woodenly concerned with the applied research that used to be their staple diet, but which is increasingly irrelevant

to the needs of US agriculture. It is especially galling that many of the sleepy but rich places live alongside people in other than agricultural departments who have to fight their way into the competitive world of modern biology through the eyes of all the needles that make up the competitive grants business administered by the NIH.

What NRC asks is that there should be an extra \$500 million — more than ten times present spending — for a new programme of competitive grants in agriculture. Its calculation that the investment would pay off is probably correct. The practical and political problem is whether the new programme could be introduced in such a way that the old agricultural establishments would not be left entirely out in the cold; otherwise, there is an eager band of congressmen ready to leap to their defence. Tactically, this requires some kind of understanding between university presidents and USDA on how to revivify the places now asleep. □

## Paying academics

British university teachers are ill-paid, but their new salary claim should be more subtle.

THE British university teachers' union, the Association of University Teachers (AUT), resolved at the week-end to ask for a 27 per cent salary increase. In equity, the claim is undeniable. Indeed, the erosion of university teachers' salaries by comparison with those their graduates quickly earn has been so rapid that it is surprising that the claim is so relatively modest. One difficulty is that their employers cannot afford to meet the claim; any extra funds will have to be provided by the government as part of its general subvention of the universities. Another is that university teachers will undermine a good case if they again engage, as threatened, in a boycott of university examinations or some other such unprofessional protest. A third, is that the present system of national bargaining on university salaries is an anachronism.

There are good tactical reasons why AUT as such cannot confess that the time has come when teachers at one university should not expect to be paid what those at another earn; to concede that at the outset of what must be a bruising negotiation (from which the real paymaster will be absent) would evidently undermine AUT's case. But entirely to deny the likelihood that there will eventually be a time when universities compete for teachers, and when the stronger get the best, is unrealistic.

Paradoxically, it could be in the best interests of most teachers at British universities that national agreements should be abandoned. Already, there is resentment in the universities that teachers at British polytechnics are better paid. But just as national salary scales are in the long run untenable, so is the division between universities and polytechnics. Universities (and academics) being what they are, it would not be in the least surprising that, when the system settles down, Oxbridge salaries will be less than at the University of the Stix. □