

emergency services also did much to diminish the consequences of last week's major shake.

The most serious danger now may be complacency. The relief of stress along the San Andreas Fault at San Jose cannot but increase stresses on other locked sections of the fault. But which of them will rupture left is anybody's guess. Yet there is bound to be a tendency to suppose that San Francisco's surprising escape last week is a sign that the building codes are sufficiently stringent as they are. But they are not. Plainly, there is room for the improvement of public services, electricity and water, for example. The spectacular collapse of a mile-long section of the double-decked Interstate 880 at Oakland is a less serious problem.

Meanwhile, California's experience last week should be a lesson for others to take to heart. Tokyo and other Japanese cities, at much the same risk as San Francisco, have also been zealous in earthquake protection but will nevertheless have much to learn from last week's earthquake. But most of the other regions of the world at risk from earthquakes are, by comparison, almost unprotected. Armenia's experience last year demonstrates that, but even European countries such as Greece and Turkey are well behind California. And what is to be said of the earthquake zones of the Indian subcontinent, the south-east Pacific and the Andean zone of South America, where the primitiveness of buildings dictated by poverty seems to be the best protection? Mainland China is an even worse case, if only because seismic risks are more generally spread than elsewhere. Where are the funds to carry California's message to these places?

It would be different if methods of predicting earthquakes were in sight, but they are not, even in California. That is why the earthquake-ridden peoples of the world will sooner or later have to stomach the cost of following suit expensively on humdrum building codes. The aid community had better take note of that before too much more time has passed. □

Research by numbers

British research councils may have sacrificed too much autonomy for administrative flexibility.

THE Wellcome Trust, the British charitable foundation, has imaginatively stepped into the vacuum left by the British government's unwillingness to support the proposed study of sexual behaviour of the British population, and has offered a grant of £900,000 to allow the planned survey to be completed (see page 675). The speed of the trust's response is especially admirable. Now, the momentum of a worthwhile venture will not be dissipated. Although the immediate objective of the survey is to gather information bearing on the assessment of the risk that AIDS will spread, the survey will also throw light more generally on the sexual behaviour of a sophisticated population and, the uncertainties of surveys of this kind

notwithstanding, should provide a more conspicuous landmark than Kinsey's US studies in the 1950s. The money will not be wasted.

Meanwhile, the means by which the British government refused to back the grant deserve more attention than they have been given. The researchers responsible for the project have been working through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the smallest of the five supposedly autonomous research councils responsible for supporting basic research in Britain. Knowing that ESRC's purse was shallow, they had sought also to interest the Department of Health and the Health Education Authority, both of which are said to have been sympathetic to the proposal. But in the end, after months of temporizing, the government, apparently in the person of the prime minister herself, said no. By what right, it may be asked?

The explanation seems to lie in the agreement reached in June this year between the Department of Education and Science (DES), which handles the British science budget, and the research councils. Most of the agreement makes sense. The research councils, for example, are given the right to carry forward 2 per cent of their expenditure from one year to another. They are also free to make grants in excess of £50,000 without seeking formal approval from the DES (the limit is now fixed at 3 per cent of gross expenditure). In return, the councils agreed to a number of requirements of the government, some of which are largely formal (the research councils undertake to "increase the quality and utility of postgraduate research", for example), but some of them are intolerably irksome.

The government's interference with the proposed survey of sexual behaviour among the British thus appears to derive from the stipulation that the government should be consulted whenever research councils plan grants "liable significantly to involve Ministers including highly contentious and politically sensitive matters of moment and matters of Ministerial resolution". The same agreement says that the research councils will refer to the DES grants "interacting significantly with other domestic policies of Government, particularly if at variance with them".

Nobody will complain that the government should have a say in major international issues, continued British membership of CERN for example, but, taken together, these requirements constitute a high price to pay for the loosening of the administrative shackles that have irked the research councils for decades. As the AIDS survey has shown, the requirement is a licence for government squeamishness. In principle, it also restrains ESRC from backing research proposals designed to investigate the good sense of the Treasury's commitment to 3 Deutschmark to the pound sterling. This, for what it is worth, is a further reason for the reorganization of the research councils under a single umbrella; then it might be possible to make a stronger fight to clothe titular autonomy with some of the reality thereof. □