

Where does Europe go from here?

Last weekend's European summit served chiefly to remind its participants that the European Community is far from being a self-consistent legal entity.

LAST weekend's meeting at Strasbourg of the heads of government of the European Community (EC) seems, against recent precedent, to have been well-mannered and even subdued. This is scarcely surprising. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, recently the chief trouble-maker at these occasions, may have had domestic reasons for showing that chauvinism can have a comely face, but all the participants at Strasbourg had plainly taken to heart Mr Mikhail Gorbachev's warning (to the disgraced leader of East Germany) that "you cannot stand in the doorway of history". They had better get on with making the EC into a common market (which it was always supposed to be) because events in Eastern Europe are treading on their heels.

It is a most curious business. The European Community owes its present form to the post-war division of Europe at Yalta. Although the 1950s founders of the community, the Jean Monnets of the times, nursed some soft thoughts that European federalism would, of its nature, be virtuous, they were mostly concerned with the political and economic benefits of economic union: a common market in Western Europe would be a bulwark against both military threats from the East and economic threats from across the Atlantic. The EC would have been created in just this form if it had seemed, in the 1950s, that the Yalta agreement might be as impermanent as it now appears.

Subdued

That explains why last weekend's meeting was subdued. It is hard to summon up enthusiasm, or even the passion required for radical disagreement, if there is a nagging doubt that the whole basis of the argument may be inappropriate. The internal agenda had been widely advertised — to arrange for a revision of the Treaty of Rome so as to allow for monetary union. Although there will be an intergovernmental conference beginning at the end of next year, the revision process will not be complete until 1993. And it will be contentious. The British, for example, will dig in their heels at many points. So, nearer decision time, will the West Germans, fearful that their own strong currency cannot but be harmed by too close an association with those of the rest of Western Europe. Yet a common market without a common currency (and a central bank to support it) makes no sense — and would give the commercial banking system needless profit from the needless

interconversion of national currencies. On this issue, there is no choice, but why not settle in the meantime, or perhaps indefinitely, for the sensible device of letting national currencies coexist with a European currency (see *Nature* 340, 580; 1989).

Last weekend's meeting draws attention to another weakness of the whole EC enterprise — its constitutional lack of a foreign policy. It is true, of course, that foreign ministers of member states can and, when they agree, do issue joint statements of their opinion on important issues, but that is not the same as being able to decide what should be done about emerging problems. The case of East Germany and the prospect of its reunification with West Germany is the tricky question. Chancellor Helmut Kohl preempted common decision by his speech, at the end of last month, describing his reunification plan. He was less respectful of the common EC interest than he should have been. One crucial consideration should have been the need to reassure the Soviet Union that its security arrangements will not be impaired — without which the liberalization of the rest of Eastern Europe will be put in hazard. Another is that the now open German border raises the prospect that the citizenship of EC may be increased by up to 17 million on the say-so of one government. Last weekend's meeting had to say something. What it said was mostly what Kohl himself had neglected to say, but in language that is thoroughly ambiguous.

How can this state of affairs be remedied? Not easily. If it takes an intergovernmental conference and a treaty revision to settle on a common currency and the ending of national idiosyncrasies (called "sovereignty") which that entails, reaching a common understanding on issues in external relations would be even more difficult. Yet there is an urgent need for a common understanding on issues ranging from military procurement to immigration policy. For lack of an understanding on the second issue, this Friday's meeting in Luxembourg to agree on frontier controls between West Germany, France and the Benelux countries is likely to be abortive. But this is simply another way of saying that even the Treaty of Rome embodies the notion that the EC must become a kind of nation-state. The requirement that people are free to live where they choose implies no less. European governments, always unwilling to acknowledge that, are understandably perplexed by the issue now. □