

Saving the world

English-speaking academies have stated a global problem, but have yet to answer it.

"It's not what we say, but who we are." That, legitimately enough, is the unspoken message behind last week's joint statement of the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences on population growth and other global problems (see page 759). Although there is little in the statement that has not been said before, the prestige of both academies is bound to carry substantial weight. The fact that both institutions have been silent through the often clamorous debates of the past quarter of a century can only increase the chances that they will now be listened to with care. Many who have hitherto shut their eyes to global problems will now be drawn in. So far, so good.

Exactly similar considerations have no doubt caused the academies to bite off their tongues at several points in their statement at which readers would expect them to have urged specific remedies. It is easier (although not easy) to win agreement among the diverse memberships of academies on the statement of important problems than to secure assent to specific recipes for their solution.

Thus, few will be offended that the academies now urge the development of new generations of "contraceptive agents and devices", but there might well have been ructions if the academies had complained of the US government's refusal to finance aid programmes that support abortion, even indirectly, not to mention the policy of churches such as the Roman Catholic designed to inhibit the use of contraceptives. And while there will be wide liberal endorsement for the academies' implicit view that the best way of managing population growth in developing countries is to effect rapid demographic transition, the serious impediments are the perverse obscurantism of many of the governments concerned and the enormous sums of money that industrialized countries would otherwise be required to transfer to them. Must it always be for others than academies to make those arguments?

The issue of priorities is also clouded. To be sure, the statement is right to single out the threat of global warming for attention. (If Mr John Sununu were still at the White House, Dr Frank Press at the National Academy would have a sharp note in the morning.) But the cause of maximal biodiversity does just as well as global warming, but unjustifiably. There are, of course, all kinds of reasons why species should be conserved. Some are ecological, and direct determinants of human well-being; it would, for example, be a thoroughly bad business if plants of the species that make cereal crops were put in hazard. In other cases, as in the conservation of whales and tigers, sitting at the tops of independent food chains, the case for conservation is, rather, aesthetic. There is also a strong thread of opinion, not widely shared, that all species have an equal right to careful custodianship. The better appraisal of the extent of global biodiversity for which the academies ask will make it easier to tell which species matter most. Would

the academies then agree that sheep, say, might be distinguished from, say, goats?

The position of biodiversity reflects a more general difficulty with the academies' general statement of their global problem. To the extent that solutions must rest on international agreements, explicit (as in the Montreal Convention) or implicit (as when donor governments let recipients know what kind of government they expect of them), the best that can be done is the most of what is feasible. One issue is whether the conference at Rio de Janeiro in June should aim at a treaty of greenhouse gas emissions in which specific limits are included, or whether instead it should aim at including as many states as possible, with the understanding that specific limits should come later (and when they can be enforced). These are essential political, not technical, decisions. Who, for example, could expect the states of the former Soviet Union to sign a global warming treaty with specific limits just a few months from now? And who would believe them if they did? This does not imply that the ideal is unattainable, but merely that it may take a little longer.

There are still more divisive issues that deserve attention, not least at the conference the academies plan to organize next year. In the past few years, it has become commonplace for financial aid to developing countries to be provided only for projects that are environmentally acceptable. The intention is laudable enough, but it supposes that all environmental damage is irreversible and that it is an acceptable charge on the meagre funds available for assistance in developing countries that a substantial fraction should be hived off for environmental purposes. The general application of this policy by agencies such as the World Bank would be mistaken. Again, the question should be that of the goals to which attention should most urgently be paid. If the objective is to reduce fertility, reductions of infant and childhood mortality are what matter more than anything else.

In the circumstances, it is honest but overdefensive of the academies to proclaim that the world should not look to science and technology alone for a solution of all these problems. The truth is that the problems to which the academies have set their pens are economic, social and political, with ethical issues never far beneath the surface. For what it is worth, much the same was true in the heyday of nineteenth century technology, and the beginning of most of the academies' global problem. Who would have been able to afford James Watt's steam engines if the banking system had not already been invented? How would the breakneck exploitation of innovation in this century have been possible without the invention, in developed countries, of social security systems? The truth is that, even in untrammelled growth, technology was not autonomous. Why should it be when the restraints are on? □

Correction

Mr Uri Geller asks that the erroneous reference to a Florida court in a recent leading article *Nature* 355,284; 23 January 1992) should be corrected. The trial of his libel action against Mr James Randi is before a federal court in Washington DC. The impending proceedings are not the trial itself, but part of the deposition (disclosure) process. □