

# Agenda for a US president

**The outcome of the election in the United States will matter greatly both for the indigenous research enterprise and for its international ramifications.**

JOURNALS such as this do not take sides in election campaigns, and for good reason. Rarely does science and a prospective government's policy on research dominate the hustings, which is on balance fortunate. In the long run, it is better for the research enterprise that its importance as an engine of constructive change should be widely appreciated, by all contenders, than that there should be single-issue elections centred on the treatment of research. But that does not mean that journals whose chief interest is the welfare of the research enterprise are indifferent to the outcome of elections. This week's presidential election in the United States will have been especially influential.

There have of course been exceptions to the rule that research plays no part in elections. In Britain in 1964, the then Mr Harold Wilson was elected prime minister on the strength of a promise that "white-hot technology" would make Britain prosperous; even a cursory appraisal of his plans would have shown that they would end in tears. There was another opportunity in 1980, when M. Francois Mitterrand was elected president of France on a research ticket whose benefits have been more substantial. This year's election campaign in the United States, which ended on Tuesday this week, has predictably had little to say about science and research since the exit of Mr Paul Tsongas from the contest in the summer. Mr Bill Clinton, the Democrat, has offered to put flesh on the bones of President George Bush's declaration four years ago that he would be the "education president", which is a step in the right direction. Mr Ross Perot has been talking about the need that the United States should build up a greater degree of technological skill. But research as such has not been a central issue.

Yet the outcome of the election, which will be known by the date of this issue, will matter a great deal for research everywhere. For the past half-century, the United States has been the world's chief source of intellectual innovation and technique in most fields of science and technology. That many of those who have individually contributed to this imaginative effort were not born in the United States is not a chauvinistic shame, but the opposite — a measure of the traditional readiness of people in the United States to respect the skills of others and to enable them to be put to good use. By that means, the United States has won both profit and honour for itself, and has helped to sustain the research enterprise elsewhere.

But now the recipe has two serious flaws. By the impoverishment of public education, too few indigenous Ameri-

cans participate in advanced education, which acts against industrial change and is also socially divisive. And US administrations, helped or even egged on by the Congress, have come to endow research with chauvinistic attributes. The attempt to persuade Japan to contribute a fifth of the cost of the Superconducting Super Collider is humiliating for both parties, the general paranoia in the United States about Japan's success in high-technology manufacturing is a dangerous misreading of the causes of the relative US decline in such fields. Whichever candidate has won, it is to be hoped that he will give these issues the attention they urgently deserve. But how?

Populist Perot, the most numerate of last week's candidates, seems to have grasped one obvious need. Although the drumbeat of his complaint against the size of the federal budget deficit seems to have been born of a homespun (and old-fashioned) belief that even governments should balance their books, the federal deficit has impeded the management of the US economy for the past several years. The newly elected president will be able to meet the electorate's demand for more jobs only by making room for extra public spending, which will entail extra taxes and reduced transfer payments, "entitlements" as they are called. Like it or not, the new incumbent at the White House will have to be a "tax and save" president, to adapt Bush's election jibe against Clinton. Let us hope that he does not choose to "save" on research and that he learns to spend on public education — or make state governments spend.

The entitlement issue is potentially more seriously divisive. The growing armies of the elderly and of the poor have a proper stake in whatever prosperity the United States can muster in the years ahead. The new man's problem is that the constituency of the poor is a novel and even un-American constituency (the long-standing poverty of Appalachia notwithstanding). Traditionally, successive waves of immigrants have been sustained through poverty by the characteristic optimism of the United States. That is also the chief source of the institutional and technical innovation that made the United States a formidable industrial power. But this election has shown the United States to be almost despondent at the social and economic problems it confronts. The new president's most important task is to change that mood. (That, in his odd, is what Perot has been saying.) Unless the new president can work that trick, the ebullience of US research since the Second World War is not the only virtue at risk of dissipation. □