

support. Whether or not the complaint is justified (see page 383), there is no question that Wales is one of several parts of the European Union in which more people (for their own interests and in the general good) should be engaged in research. Greece, Ireland and Portugal are others.

Quebec's remedy cannot apply in Wales or Northern Ireland; Quebec raises provincial taxes of its own, using them in part to support supplementary research funds, but Wales and Northern Ireland depend for all their revenue on funds transferred from Westminster to government departments based at the provincial capitals, Cardiff and Belfast respectively. Welsh nationalists are now demanding that 5 per cent of British research council funds should also be transferred to Cardiff for the Welsh Office to spend as it chooses, but that is quite misguided. Quite apart from the recently acquired reputation of Welsh public institutions for mispending public money, that would be a recipe for supporting research that would not qualify competitively for support. What Wales needs is a means for helping potentially able research groups to get started on research. (Northern Ireland has such a fund, perhaps only temporarily.) That is what Plaid Cymru, the nationalist party, should be pushing for.

In Britain as a whole, one of the defects of the present arrangements for research support is that it has been made constitutionally insensitive to regional considerations. Research grants are awarded competitively, while substantial contributions to overhead costs are channelled through the higher education funding councils on the basis of the regular research 'assessments' of university departments. Left to itself, this system can only further increase the concentration of research on well-established centres, exacerbating the sense of neglect at peripheral institutions and making it a self-justifying prophecy that their research-grant applications will always be uncompetitive. The remedy for Wales, as well as for institutions in England not in the mainstream of research, is that there should be funds to enable promising research groups to prepare to compete effectively, which is not a trivial undertaking. The goal is at once to increase the value and maintain the quality of research, not to foster the first at the expense of the second.

Some version of this recipe could be made to work on a European scale, but with the European Commission playing the central role. The obvious difficulty is that even if the commission were to offer initial support to promising research groups chosen transparently, by independent expert committees, there might be no research funds for which to compete. That is why, on the European scale, it would be preferable that the commission should follow the practice in the United States whereby central granting agencies make deals with recipient governments to share the costs of helping research get started. That way, it must be hoped, recipient governments would be shamed into turning promising ideas into well-founded research programmes. Without some such device, the regional disparities of which Plaid Cymru complains in Britain will be perpetuated on a much larger scale in Europe as a whole. □

Assassination in Mexico

Last week's outrage will at least give the United States a beneficent interest south of its border.

ONE thing is certain about last week's assassination in Mexico of the government party's candidate for president in the elections due next August, Mr Luis Donaldo Colosio: the US Congress would not have passed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) if the assassination had already happened. Opposition to NAFTA was already strong enough to require President Bill Clinton to deploy the full battery of sticks and carrots with which US presidents are endowed. He would have found the task impossible in the light of such apparently glaring evidence of lawlessness (the attempt on the life of his own predecessor in 1981 notwithstanding). In the event, Clinton has followed the honourable and neighbourly course, offering to swap US\$6 billion for pesos if Mexico should need help on the foreign exchanges.

Thus is the course of history shaped. Six months ago, the assassination would have made a gulf between the United States and Mexico. Now, it has the opposite effect of drawing them together. Although most of last year's opposition to NAFTA in the US Congress stemmed from anxiety that jobs would migrate south of the border, Mexico's political system also attracted substantial complaint. To people in the United States, it is more than a mere cause for wonder that the same political party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI) should have been in power for 65 years. President Manuel Salinas has done something to meet complaints from the north, but not so much as to risk his party's loss of the election. But NAFTA is an important feather in his cap. The best hope, for Mexico and for the rest of North America, is that his successor will have a chance to build a more thorough reform on that.

There is much to do. Mexico is an important and populous country of more than 80 million energetic people in transition from backwardness to modernity. Much of Mexico is rich, but there is too much obvious grinding poverty. NAFTA could generate the resources with which to complete the transition to a modern state as well as to make a lasting settlement with the Zapatista rebels in the Chiapas region of the south. (Already, the government's annual budget deficit of US\$20 billion a year is offset by the inward flow of investment funds.) The result could be not only a modern but a democratic Mexico.

The case for NAFTA has always been mostly economic. Not only Mexico but also its trading partners in the United States and Canada will benefit. But a side-effect, usually beneficial, of free trade is political and cultural interdependence. Last week's assassination will no doubt make the United States pay more, and more intelligent attention, to what is happening in Mexico and even further south. That, sad consequence of a man's needless death though it may be, will be in everybody's interest, not just Mexico's. Maybe we shall now see the beginning of the Pan-American policy people have been talking of for a century. □