

the US national laboratories are allowed to continue to drift as in the past several years, the quality of those who work in them will disastrously decline. Out of politeness, no doubt, the task force has evidently shrunk from saying that no such innovation will be given a chance if the old guard at the DoE has its say.

The task force, meanwhile, has done as much as it could to improve morale at the laboratories. Its attack on the bureaucracy rather than the laboratories themselves will no doubt evoke a chorus of "We've been saying that for years!" True, there is some talk of "downsizing" (shamefully accompanied by the politically correct "rightsizing" in a few references), but that should not worry the good people at these excellent laboratories. For them, the task force has a cheerful prospectus. Why not take energy research and policy more seriously? Why not lump energy conservation with the conservation (or economical use) of other industrial raw materials in a new attack on "industrial ecology"? And then there are always the clean-up programme and the fight against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It is an almost thrilling tale. DoE may be too jaded to listen to it. Will the new Congress simply pocket as much as it can of the \$6 billion a year the national laboratories spend, and not bother to listen? That is what will matter. □

Intellectual wars

The US dispute with China over intellectual property rights threatens lasting and avoidable trouble.

THE US dispute with China over the protection of intellectual property is a high-grade dispute and could quickly escalate if it is not defused. The US Trade Representative, Mr Mickey Kantor, has decreed that roughly \$1 billion's worth of Chinese exports to the United States will be subjected to 100 per cent tariffs from the end of the month, and will thus be unaffordable. The cause of the trade war is China's unwillingness to protect US intellectual property with the diligence the United States requires of its trading partners. It is a pity that Kantor has not found safer ground on which to fight. China's predictable promise to retaliate will bring no good either.

Copyright is, of course, a crucial element in international trade. Devised to protect authors' rights in works their ingenuity has made possible, copyright is the means by which the authors earn a just reward and their emulators are spurred to do even better. But there is copyright and copyright. Even in the rich countries of the world, it is increasingly a problem, for the would-be legal purchasers of copyrighted software, to buy what they want without having to buy (at extra cost) extra bells and whistles for which they have no need. In the poorer countries of the world, the terms on which copyrighted materials are made available are crucial. In China, which is economically powerful in aggregate but still poverty-stricken per capita, Western royalties on software and compact discs would ensure no sales.

Kantor would be entirely within his right to indignation with China if there were grounds for believing that the

government condones the export from China of counterfeited software and the like. A sufficiently public display of such indignation would probably bring such practices to a halt. But the rest of his complaint would carry greater weight if he were able to show how the manufacturers of the US materials allegedly pirated in China had offered reasonable terms for their local reproduction, and had been refused. That vital missing element in the case should be plugged before the inevitable escalation sets in. □

Is plagiarism OK?

A bruising civil suit between two academics at the University of Hong Kong will do the university no good.

THE University of Hong Kong has had more on its mind these past two years than the prospect that it will be within the borders of China in less than 30 months. At the end of 1993, Hong Kong's appeal court confirmed an earlier court decision in favour of Dr Linda Koo, who had brought a civil suit against a close colleague, Dr Lam Tai Ying, for damages on the grounds of plagiarism. Koo and Lam are respectively a lecturer and a reader in the department of community medicine at the university. Koo's complaint was that Lam had used a questionnaire she had devised to inquire into the surprisingly high incidence of lung cancer among women in Hong Kong to devise his own questionnaire, to be used in a study of the surprisingly high incidence of lung cancer among women in Hong Kong.... A civil suit does not, of course, lead to a criminal trial. The questions to decide are not 'guilt' or 'innocence', but 'liability' and 'how much?'

The first thing to say about such a suit is that it should never happen (or have happened). However dark may be the thoughts that academics harbour against their colleagues "in the still night, when only the Moon rages", in the light of day a minimal sense of perspective would dictate that there must be better ways. That is all the more the case when the disputing academics belong not merely to the same university, but to the same department. But the University of Hong Kong seems not to have found the trick to head off either the original dispute or its inevitable successor, the formal question whether Lam should be dismissed for scientific misconduct. So a committee took evidence from all in sight (except for Koo, whom it failed to accommodate in its timetable) and decided that Lam should remain in post.

In Hong Kong and even elsewhere, it will seem a daring and even a foolhardy decision by a university (however properly arrived at) to fly in the face of a court decision, even in a civil suit. But there will also be many, in Hong Kong and elsewhere, who will be asking whether it can make sense that academics can take each other to court. Other questions, not yet answered, are why the same department of community medicine thought it a sensible use of resources to mount two such parallel investigations of the same problem that plagiarism could be judged beneficial. Squabbles like this, in short, give universities a bad name. Let us hope that Beijing will not have noticed. □