

of the utilities concerned, when the costs would fall not on the local people but on the bondholders.

But local people are entitled to expect that NRC has done everything it can to ensure that the plants will operate safely, and that it has workable plans for dealing with emergencies. If NRC takes back responsibility for deciding these questions, it could do worse than carry the argument to the people who now think themselves to be in serious danger. In the present climate, that will be a difficult undertaking. Ideally, the administration of which NRC is a small part should do what it can to help. But with an election coming up, that is a lot to ask for. □

UNCTAD's good news

Rich and poor countries seem nearer to an understanding on mutual assistance, but will it stick?

THE United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which meets in full session every four years, seems to have had a productive session last month in Geneva. For an organization best known as a talking shop, and an acrimonious one, that comes as a surprise.

Why, this year, should the climate apparently have changed? There have been two important developments. The rich countries, having mostly failed to provide aid on the scale for which the poor have been asking, have found that the poor have been able to find some of the cash they needed by borrowing from the West's commercial banks and then letting the loans turn sour. The fact that the funds have been taken not from public revenues but from the pockets of the banks' shareholders is irrelevant. What is plain is that this process will not easily be repeated, that neither financial aid nor commercial bank loans are likely to be distributed among the poor countries in the way that makes most economic sense and that the best long-term solution, for rich and poor alike, is to enable the poor countries to trade their way out of poverty. That is what the developed world seems to have been saying at Geneva.

At the same time, the poor countries seem to have gone a long way to accepting the Western idiom in which capital and interest are different kinds of money sums, in which political autonomy has its roots in solvency and in which the provision of basic skills, in agriculture and by education, is a necessary step in the development of a stable society.

What does UNCTAD's new amity imply for the years ahead? The most dramatic of the proposals canvassed at Geneva, by the United States, is that there should be an international agreement to abolish agricultural subsidies (see *Nature* 328, 188; 1987) over a period of ten years. Part of the objective is to give poor countries a better chance to make their way in the world by selling what they most easily produce, although the United States appears also to have calculated that getting rid of subsidies would be the most effective way of giving US farmers export markets in protected Europe and Japan.

Whatever the US motives, there can be no doubt that the poor countries would also benefit. But there is only the slimmest prospect that the rich countries will agree among themselves to follow such a course. Nor will they easily be persuaded to abolish the "multi-fibre agreement" used to protect the textile industries of the West from cheaper imports from elsewhere.

That is why UNCTAD's one successful meeting should not mislead. It will be splendid if the meeting can be taken as a sign that the rich countries of the world are coming round to the notion that the free trade they espouse (with limitations and reservations) among themselves is logically indivisible, and that the poor countries should be helped to share its benefits (and learn its disciplines). To be sure, some of the governments of poor countries are at present among the worst offenders. But is there hope of persuading them to change their ways while rich countries conspire to prevent them earning what they might by honest trade? □

Economy in space

Britain's National Space Centre should be put on the back burner for a few decades.

MR Roy Gibson, director of the British National Space Centre, did the decent thing when, last week, he quit his job. Gibson has spent nine months pleading with the government that employed him for a budget commensurate with the grand expectations of his post, magicked out of thin air early in 1986 by Mr (now Sir) Geoffrey Pattie, a somewhat oafish minister in the pre-election Thatcher government. Gibson did not get his way. To be fair to everybody, it was never clear whether the National Space Centre was meant as Britain's proof that it would make a mark in space (spending new money on the way) or as a relabelling exercise in which various activities, some military and some civil, would be lumped together and coordinated to make them more visible. Did Pattie win his senior colleagues' approval for his little scheme by telling them he meant the second while telling people like Gibson that he meant the first? The British will not know for 30 years when some public records are made public, but Pattie has been dropped from the government; it is tough that Gibson should have to resign his job as well.

The dilemma remains for Britain, and for many other countries like it, of what part it should play in space. Gibson's resignation has sent British newspapers scurrying through their files to remind themselves that, a quarter of a century ago, Britain was busily developing the Bluestreak military rocket as if it were almost one of the big boys. Why, the British press has been asking, was that technically successful project abandoned when the total cost was comparatively small, only to become the basis of the mostly successful and titularly European (but largely French) civilian rocket Ariane?

In reality, Bluestreak's demise had as much to do with the military calculation that the deployment of conspicuous immobile missiles would make Britain more and not less vulnerable as with the arrival of the first Wilson government in 1964 or the money that had been spent. But the rhetorical question the newspapers have been asking deserves a straight answer: Britain (and countries like it) does not have the technical resources, and in particular the technical manpower, to make projects like these succeed while keeping the economy ticking over. Preoccupied though Gibson may have been with other matters, even he will have remarked on last week's stark proof of that, the 1 per cent increase of British interest rates on Thursday and the precipitous decline of the London stock market that followed.

But what connection can there be between Britain's capacity to play a daring role in space and the evident continuing fragility of its economy? The lack of technical competence is the connecting thread. This week's economic statistics will show whether the Bank of England has taken fright because Britain's trade figures have gone awry again or because bank lending shows inflationary trends once more. Whatever the case, the explanation is the same. Britain is no longer a substantial source of technically advanced manufactured products so distinctive that international customers have nowhere else to go. The explanation of that is that Britain has neglected its technical culture for most of the past four decades. The result is that, against market logic, too many technical people are undervalued (and badly paid) and that there are three million people unemployed.

Some of what the present British government is attempting is meant to redress the balance, but backing an ambitious space programme would plainly work the other way. So the government was right to say no to Gibson. Many other Western European governments, Belgium and Portugal for example, would be compelled, if asked, to say the same. Two or three decades from now, when it may be clear whether Britain's economy will revive, will be time enough to repeat Gibson's question. □