

## Does M'Bow bow out?

*Management is changing at UNESCO. Spain's Frederic Mayor needs a persuasive programme.*

THE Executive Committee of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) deserves credit for having walked through the fire of Mr Amadou M'Bow's displeasure and the anger of the African governments supporting his bid for a third term as director general. By the weekend, after making it a condition for one last adjournment of its complicated voting procedure that there "shall be no more adjournments", the committee decided to nominate Dr Frederic Mayor, the Spanish biochemist, as M'Bow's successor. Until Mayor's election has been confirmed by UNESCO's general conference next month, it would be wrong to suppose that UNESCO is now back on an even keel. There is at least one other occasion when the Executive Committee's recommendation has been overturned. On this occasion, Mr M'Bow's constituents will be lobbying hard until the last minute, perhaps even afterwards. But on the face of things, reason has emerged on top.

This journal, although it supported another candidate (see *Nature* 329, 472; 1987) offers Mayor warm congratulations alloyed with the comiserations appropriate to the task ahead of him. One of his qualifications for the job is that he is a scientist — a biochemist — by training. Another is that he is deft at persuading people that what he wants them to do is in their best interests. During his spell as Minister of Education in the post-Franco government of Spain, he used this skill to found what may still be Spain's best-known laboratory, the Centro Biología Molecular at Madrid. That, more than his previous experience (during M'Bow's first term as director general) of UNESCO's problems from the inside, is what the demoralized organization in Paris will most value.

In reality, the task ahead is not what it is usually likened to, that of the Augean stable, but the more difficult yet more interesting task of giving a rudderless ship a sense of direction. The first need is to escape from UNESCO's preoccupation over the past several years with its own administration. If Mayor can also devise a programme of work uniting member governments in the belief that UNESCO is embarked on tasks that are at once useful and feasible, he may even win the greatest prize of all: the state of grace in which members are so interested in what is going on that they have no interest in using UNESCO as a stalking horse for their political objectives.

There are also some preliminary points that need to be established. UNESCO is an international organization involving both rich and poor countries, but it does not follow that UNESCO must behave as if it were just another aid organization. Indeed, its budget is too small to make much of a dent in that role (which is not the same as saying that there is no part for it to play in the process of development, or that no attention should be given to the special problems of the poor).

Second, UNESCO's much maligned staff is not the uniformly malevolent influence on affairs it is made out to be. Many of its members are, by contrast, able and knowledgeable people whose frustration in recent years has been that maladministration has prevented them working effectively. Their demoralization can be lifted easily; the more difficult task will be to win their consent to the proposition that members of the UNESCO staff are not by definition scholars, but people whose skills are (or should be) in the administration of projects usually conceived by others. The new administration will need to welcome more readily than its predecessors advice from independent scholars. (To his credit, M'Bow did at one stage set up an advisory committee on scientific projects.)

Finally, the new administration must not be thrown off course by the likelihood — indeed, the certainty — that much of the

work it may attempt will raise political issues. UNESCO's successful sponsorship of the negotiations leading to the Paris amendment of the Berne Copyright Convention, for example, entailed a political compromise between governments with powerful publishing industries and those without them. More contentious issues would arise if UNESCO sought (as legitimately it might) to define how and when legitimate scholars and researchers should be free to move about the surface of the Earth. The new UNESCO should welcome work whose consequences are so important that some of its members regard them as political, for that will be a sign that it is ploughing where it may be profitable to sow seed. What it must somehow avoid is the politicization of which the United States (and others) have rightly complained, and which has blocks of countries voting in unison.

What projects, in the circumstances, to tackle? Mayor's difficulty (if he eventually gets the job) will be that there are too many useful things to do, not too few. How best to extend the academic computer networks now covering the rich part of the world to the places still out in the cold? What about an equitable convention on the use of computer software? What is to be done with and about the mountains of geophysical data being accumulated by Earth satellites, or by the nucleotide-sequencing banks? Is there yet an agreed basis for an international convention of the procedures that should be followed in genetic manipulation? To what extent does a practising scientist have an allegiance to science rather than to his or her employer? Mayor does not have to tackle all these issues at once; he will, in any case, have to demonstrate that he is more than a mere biochemist willing to throw culture out of the window. But at some stage, say a year from now, he will need an important theme. Some people say it should be science education: science education for all, everywhere. It is a challenging idea. But it could be made to work. □

## Bubble goes Bang!

*Those seeking a scapegoat for the past week's stock market crash had better blame the President.*

PEOPLE with an interest in demonstrating that water will run uphill are usually adept at rigging the topography. but the president of the United States for the past seven years is made of simpler stuff. He believes that taxes imposed by governments (of one of which he is the head) are intrinsically bad, he knows in his bones that he is right, and he has steadfastly resisted the notion that taxes in the United States should be increased to the point at which his treasurer, Mr James Baker, would not have to go every week to Wall Street to parley people into lending their surplus cash to the government of the United States.

As always, the consequences of irrationally devised policies have been paradoxical. Mr Baker's enticements have persuaded his fellow countrymen to lend to the US government, allowing others (from Japan and even Western Europe) to snap up the investments disposed of in the pursuit of relatively higher income. Mr Baker has even spent much of the past week complaining at West Germany's increase of interest rates two weeks ago, forgetting that Bonn (or, rather, Frankfurt) has merely been fighting for its share of liquidity. The good news, now, is that the US Congress has given itself until mid-November to settle the budget for the present year; Mr Reagan could clean up much of the mess he has created by asking the Congress to raise a tax — a few cents on gasoline would do the trick.

But that will probably not happen, if only from the fear that next year's election would be influenced, in which case there will be a real crash. *Nature's* concern in this matter stems simply from the circumstance that most of its readers contribute to now-devalued pension funds. □