

declaration of the centrality of personal liberty, much emulated elsewhere in the past two centuries. Would it not have been anomalous that a republican government that does not dare instruct its citizens how, for example, to dress on the beaches of Southern France would think of telling them how, and how not, to use their language?

None of that implies that Toubon's anxiety is misplaced. On the contrary, it is a proper part of a culture minister's brief to seek to safeguard the national language. But French deserves special regard, if not for the reasons usually given. French native-speakers say that their language is especially pleasing to the ear, but that is a prejudice of all native-speakers, as justifiable in Italy or Russia as in France. French also embodies a great volume of the world's outstanding literature, but who would claim that de Maupassant is more important than Dostoevsky or Dumas more important than Tolstoy? Translation is in any case a second best, while the deconstructionists would be quick to argue that translations of great works of literature lack the essential link between meaning and the language used to express it. It is the same with scholarship: those who wish to know what others have written have to learn the language.

The special case for French is that it is politically an important language. Many of those watching tragic television films from Rwanda in the past few weeks will have been struck that those speaking non-native languages there most often speak French (which they may have learned from the Belgians). In at least half of Africa, French is the first alternative language.

The difficulty with this view of the French or any language is that it evokes chauvinism. Any government's policy on its national language should be aimed at separating the cultural and social value of a vernacular that is easily and joyously used by voters in their mutual communication from the role of the same language as an instrument of foreign policy. To be fair to Toubon's law, it was mostly concerned with the use of French within France. Its faults were that it was unreasonably and (it now appears) unconstitutionally prescriptive. The British press has been making hay with the news that French citizens will not now be forbidden to welcome 'le weekend'; the question that nobody asked is whether such a requirement could have been enforced. The French government may be lucky that the constitutional council has come out against the law.

The dilemma remains, and indeed will be sharpened if the law is redrafted for another run through the Assembly. How to keep the language faithful to its roots and yet still widely used? That is an impossible trade-off. The Irish government has attempted that with Gaelic, and now has one of the purest and least used languages in the world. It would be a great misfortune for us all if French went that way. So the French government's best strategy would be to fight the intrusion of foreign phrases by ridiculing those that make no sense on the grounds that they are pretentious, but otherwise to let their language find its own level. English has become so widely used (and no worse a language) for just that reason, that there have been no constraints on how it is used by the great diversity of those who speak or write it. □

## More bad news on AIDS

**Japan is the site of the 10th International AIDS conference and the news seems more depressing than ever.**

SCIENTISTS who keep themselves well informed about AIDS research know that progress in understanding such things as mechanisms of HIV replication have yet to produce a cure for the disease. Epidemiologists also know that HIV infection is about to reach major epidemic proportions in much of the world, particularly in Asia where heterosexual transmission is the primary mode of transmission.

In fact, from the incalculable amount of news print and air time that has been devoted to AIDS during the past decade, it is possible to conclude that there is no one alive who could be unaware of the dangers of unprotected sexual activity and the risk of contracting this lethal disease.

Alas, the data being reported from the 10th International AIDS conference in Yokohama suggest an astonishing lack of comprehension of the magnitude of the problem, let alone its biomedical solution. A report in the 11 August issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* (331, 341–346 and 391–392) is equally discouraging. First, Japan. In what is said to be a show of solidarity and concern, the conference was attended by both the prime minister and the crown prince, but they had little to offer beyond a non-specific pledge to establish AIDS research and prevention programmes. This, coming in 1994, is too little, too late. According to the World Health Organization, the infection rate in Asian nations neighbouring Japan run to the hundreds of thousands, yet Japanese health officials record testing no more than 4,000 people at risk.

Equally disconcerting are data from a longitudinal study of AIDS transmission among heterosexual couples in which one partner was known to be HIV-positive. Reporting in *The New England Journal of Medicine* on behalf of the European Study Group, Isabelle de Vincenzi notes that all of the study participants were advised to use condoms during intercourse and that, among the 124 (or 48 per cent) of couples who followed that advice consistently, no seronegative partner contracted AIDS during roughly 24 months of follow-up. That's the good news. The bad news is that, despite knowledge about AIDS transmission, more than 50 per cent of the couples failed to use condoms consistently. Twelve of the seronegative individuals in that group became HIV-positive during the study.

The authors admit their study, one of the first to follow transmission patterns prospectively, is small. And this report is but a brief condensation of the data. Nevertheless, the message is clear. After all these years, the message about the danger of AIDS is not getting through. It is not just the medical scientists who have their work cut out for them. It is now painfully clear that the behavioural scientists had better put all of their talent into gaining a better understanding of human behaviour and how to change it before whole populations of relatively young men and women succumb to AIDS. □