

Editorial

BY THE END OF the year Britain, having given notice to quit the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), will have to decide whether to withdraw from it or to stay in. The United States, having given notice earlier, left at the end of 1984.

Both the United States and Britain have no quarrel with the objectives of Unesco, which as stated in Article 1 of its Constitution reads as follows:

The purpose of the Organization is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.

Nor have these countries any great objection to the major part of its programme, which they have approved in the past, and which does much useful work within its framework, particularly in the dissemination of science and the campaign against illiteracy. The real objections are to be found in serious discontent (shared by most of the western countries) with the management of the Organization, the size of the budget and a small corner of its programme of activities.

Unesco is a cumbersome body. It was founded in 1946 with 28 participating states, but the number of members has now grown to some 160. The secretariat, heavily concentrated in Paris, with much power in the hands of the Director General, is recruited more on the grounds of geographical location of the candidates rather than personal competence, and having been in existence for forty years it suffers from many of the faults inherent in bureaucratic growth. The projects which now number 187 sub-programmes are widely dispersed, while at the same time there is little decentralization of function to the regional offices. The evaluation machinery for assessing the worth of projects is unsatisfactory, and there is too much emphasis placed upon published studies rather than more action-orientated projects of direct benefit to developing countries. There is also the complaint that Unesco is still active in fields such as disarmament, intellectual property and human rights which can be dealt with by other specific UN bodies which have been established since the birth of Unesco.

The General Conference, which meets every two years, takes decisions on the budget and the programme, by a simple majority of each member state present and voting. The secretariat prepares the draft programme, and is responsible for its execution. There is a go-between in the shape of the Executive Board on which at present fifty states are represented, whose duty it is to prepare the agenda for the General

Conference and also to be responsible for the execution of the programme by the secretariat.

Beyond the complaints of inefficiency in the administration, the industrialized countries have had to face an "automatic majority" of the developing countries ranged against them, generally with the support of the Soviet Union. As a result the budget has been allowed to expand at a higher rate than in other UN organizations and the United States, which supplies 25 per cent of the budget contributions, has been an active protester. Complaint is also made that programmes have been introduced that are directed more against the western democracies than are consistent with objectivity. This applies particularly to the proposals for a "new world information and communication order" introducing an international code of press ethics which, it is claimed, would imply governmental control and censure, and so militate against a free press. Criticism is also levelled at the elaboration of new formulations of human rights concepts, the so-called "people's rights" supported by the socialist countries, which deal with collective rights to peace, disarmament, development, employment etc. The West has sternly set its face against the new information order, and had declined to elevate people's rights to the stature of those individual rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In view of the withdrawal of the United States, and the threatened withdrawal of Britain and the two others, considerable steps have been taken to try and improve the situation. The Secretary General Mr. M'Bow established five working groups to advise him on certain matters which might be reformed, and the Executive Board set up a Temporary Committee consisting of twelve members (including Britain, France and the Soviet Union) "to present to the Board recommendations and concrete measures designed to improve the functioning of the Organization".

The Temporary Committee has made a large number of recommendations, and has considered in particular the problem of decision making. It rejected suggestions that there should be a system of weighted voting, or that there should be a specially qualified majority reserved for certain issues. The Committee came firmly to the conclusion that decisions must be taken by consensus. Its members devoted considerable care to explaining exactly what the concept of consensus implied, and its eight recommendations in this respect are set out in full in the Annex. Before it left the Organization, the United States wanted to propose that the adoption of the budget should require the support of 85 per cent of the member countries, thus giving the developed countries a right of veto, but this found no support from the latter and the proposal was not pursued.

The issue of the voting procedure would appear to be linked to the question of the universality of the membership. If it is expected that there should be universal membership, then consensus would seem to be the

method by which it may be fostered and contained. When the constitution of Unesco was framed, the precedent in the United Nations Charter was followed, having no provision for the withdrawal of a member, as it was contemplated that universality would prevail. After Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia left Unesco a provision dealing with withdrawal was introduced in 1954. South Africa, Indonesia and Portugal also withdrew, but all these with the exception of South Africa have since rejoined.

On the issue of universality, President Reagan speaking at the 1984 session of the General Assembly said:

We are proud, too, of our role in the formation of the United Nations and our support of this body over the years. And let me again emphasize our unwavering commitment to a central principle of the United Nations system, the principle of universality, both here and in the United Nations technical agencies around the world. If universality is ignored, if nations are expelled illegally, then the United Nations itself cannot be expected to succeed.

This must surely indicate that the United States will return to Unesco when the time is suitable.

It was stated by Mr. Hennelly, the U.S. representative in the 1983 General Conference, that the issue of the budget was one of principle rather than amount. In fact it has been reckoned that the U.S. contribution was equivalent to roughly half the cost of a medium-sized American university. The United States proposes to spend this sum anyway on its own Unesco-like projects, though even American sources doubt whether this will be as good value for money as membership to Unesco. Mrs. Gerard, the U.S. representative at the last Executive Board meeting attended by the United States, declared that the United States left "more in sorrow than in anger". For its part, Unesco has requested the U.S. government to reconsider its decision; it has provided the United States with the facility to set up a permanent observer mission in Paris, a provision intended not for members withdrawing but for prospective joiners, and it has not disturbed the position of the existing U.S. nationals in the secretariat, although the United States loses its quota rights to an equitable distribution of posts.

Meanwhile there has been considerable improvement of the Organization. Reforms and economies have been introduced, the budget has been cut down and the programmes revised. It remains to be seen whether these changes will be sufficient to induce Britain and the others to stay in, and for the United States to return.

Turning to more general matters, it would seem that any real collaboration between East and West requires some form of consensus not only in the global organizations but also for cooperation on an all-European basis. It may be recalled that the Final Act of the Conference on

Security and Cooperation in Europe, drawn up in Helsinki a decade ago, was concerned essentially with three areas: security; economics, science and technology, and the environment; and humanitarian matters—contacts, information, culture and education. If little progress has been made in the first area and the third has proved controversial, the second has been fruitful, perhaps largely because the main follow-up instrument has been the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. This body tends to be in the news at its annual session when there are sometimes heavy verbal exchanges between the West and the East. For the rest of the year there are continual meetings going on of the technical committees or their subsidiary organs, where experts from all European countries participate, serviced by a well qualified and experienced secretariat whose “operational” approach has evolved over all but forty years, and one in which there is a constant search for agreement or at least consensus in often small but always practical matters.

It may be argued that the balance of advantage in this kind of cooperation lies with Eastern Europe, which has more to gain from technical cooperation than the West, and where much of the work on trade consists of finding ways of accommodating the complexities of an economic system which pays scant regard to the market or price. Moreover there are likely to be some occasions when there are security reasons for limiting trade. But the advantages of maximizing international trade are sooner or later apparent to all. And this means working out international rules and arrangements, by give and take in the search for a consensus. The ECE has been able to make an important contribution in most of the fields covered by the second area of the Helsinki Agreement and there are illustrations in the present issue in the shape of contributions on long-range transboundary air pollution, trade facilitation and transport.

ANNEX

Extract from the Report of the Temporary Committee established by
the Executive Board of Unesco
(120 EX/3 of 3 October 1984)

1. The Committee reaffirms its commitment to the practice of consensus, which it considers essential to the harmonious functioning of an organization for international co-operation such as Unesco.
2. Consensus is a negotiating practice which should not be codified. It is a practice based on the will of Member States to seek concerted solutions, acceptable to all, to the problems confronting them.
3. Consensus, which is the result of concessions freely made, does not preclude the expression of reservations. Reservations expressed at the time of the adoption of a decision should, however, be attached to the text of any decision adopted by consensus.

4. The expression of reservations should in no way be taken to mean non-acceptance and should accordingly affect neither the validity of a decision adopted by consensus nor the responsibilities for Member States arising therefrom.
5. Reaching consensus needs time and appropriate procedures for concertation among Member States, including informal consultations. This requirement should be fully recognized when the timetable for each meeting is drawn up.
6. If, after all possibilities of negotiation have been exhausted, it proves impossible to reach a consensus which preserves the fundamental interests of all parties concerned, then it may be preferable to resort to a vote rather than to adopt a consensus text based on ambiguity.
7. It would be highly desirable to make every effort to ensure that the programme and budget of the Organization are, as far as possible, adopted by consensus. Member States should try to reach unofficial agreement, by consensus, on the budgetary ceiling before it is put to vote. However, the pursuit of consensus must on no account serve as a means of obstructing the decision-making process.
8. To this end, provision should be made for increased opportunities for consultation among Member States and between Member States and the Secretariat, particularly at the time of the preparation of the draft programme and budget (C/5 document) by the Secretariat and in any event before the draft programme and budget is considered by the governing bodies, since international co-operation and the resulting responsibilities for all members of the international community are basic prerequisites to be considered when seeking agreement.