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PRIME MINISTER 21 July 1989

BNSC

I agree that we should leave BNSC alone for the moment. The fears which I expressed last year, that we were leaving a structure in place which had already embarrassed the Government by lobbying for huge expenditures, has not been borne out. BNSC is well controlled by its present Director General, Arthur Pryor, a DTI Under Secretary and well fulfils its inter-departmental co-ordinating role.

If the people involved were different, these dangers might resurface. Currently however, BNSC is representing Britain's position effectively at ESA and has efficiently renegotiated us into the Polar platform. It is an organisation which is supporting Government policy by pushing for maximum industrial funding of space application and concentrating our national efforts on value for money rather than man-in-space type 'gloire' projects. It is reassuring that the DTI proposes to house it physically within their own premises rather than letting it remain a separate organisation on Millbank.

The UK's low key space strategy which emphasises the commercial and Government uses of space rather than pandering to the exhortations of the space lobby appears to be gaining international support. See for instance today's Times leader attached on George Bush's proposals for Mars. Fairclough's emphasis is therefore right, that BNSC's purpose is to represent departmental and industrial customers rather than aerospace producers. This point should be emphasised in replying to Lord Young.

GEORGE GUISE

Times 21/7

APOLLO'S SHADE

President Bush's pledge yesterday to establish an American base on the moon followed by a manned expedition to Mars was a political response to persistent complaints that the US space programme was fatally handicapped by a "lack of goals". His speech accepts the contention of the US National Aeronautics and Space Agency that "back to the moon" means, as he put it, "back to the future".

The frustrations in the international scientific community are genuine. Twenty years after Neil Armstrong's "giant leap for mankind", many scientists would concur with Sir Bernard Lovell's harsh conclusion that the intervening decades represent "wasted opportunity". Mars, which then seemed so close that the head of the Apollo moon mission predicted that man would be there by 1978, receded. So did the dream of colonizing space.

Much of the gloom proceeds from the fact that progress has been measured, particularly in the United States, less in terms of increased understanding of basic matter and the solar system than in ability to make man into "a multi-planet species". Nasa scientists complain that Congress expects it to reach for the stars without giving it the money to cross the street. They have concluded that the popular support necessary to wring giant sums out of Congress can be mustered only for the goal of putting Americans on Mars.

However understandable, that is not, or should not be, the test of a successful space programme. Space exploration has given marvellous stimulus to the imagination and transformed our lives, but it is man's intelligence, not man's presence, which has yielded the most spectacular results in space exploration.

A fraction of the money spent on the Challenger space shuttle launched the Voyager spacecraft, the second of which will reach Neptune next month and will still be sending data back to Earth in the next century. Camera-equipped robots could by now have been on Mars had the development of robotics and electronic probes been Nasa's priority, not the fostering of dreams about men mining asteroids for platinum and cobalt.

Soviet scientists are openly questioning the wisdom of man-centred space programmes. After the disasters which befell the two unmanned Phobos probes launched by the Soviet Union to Mars last year, the US has no need to prove its superiority to the Russian programme.

Space scientists must dream great dreams. That does not alter the need for Nasa to learn to live with concepts such as technological feasibility and the ratio of benefit to cost. Above all, it must learn the skill of conveying to the public the excitement of breaching technological as well as physical frontiers.

The trouble is that the Apollo mission seemed to demonstrate that clear presidential leadership could make the impossible possible. Hence the pressures on Mr Bush to bless the goal of colonizing the Moon and heading from that dubiously equipped base to Mars. What matter that the technical problems seem insuperable? Was the Apollo programme not a triumph over scepticism?

The President has obliged, up to a point. He has pledged to make the US the "pre-eminent space-faring nation". Unlike Kennedy, however, he has set no timetable and left it to a committee to establish what he has termed the "fiscal sanity" of Nasa's project.

When it reports, the committee will almost certainly tell Mr Bush that it will cost far more than the Apollo mission (which absorbed, in today's dollars, over $230 billion). He should then tell the scientists, at this early stage in man's journeying in space, to concentrate on sending out the robots first. That too would be a step for mankind.