LETTERS

Going west

Sir—You imply in your survey of Central Europe (November 25th) that the closer people are to the West, the more civilised they are. Really? Western Europe has brought death and destruction to the East for centuries—think of Ancient Rome, the crusades, Napoleonic France and 20th-century Germany. The apparently cultured people of Central Europe closed their eyes when millions of their Jewish compatriots were rounded up by the Nazis. Those "rough" Balkan people, as the Bulgarians, did not.

Post-communism created a yearning for the West's material wealth, but not for its supposedly superior cultural values. The crate of western democracy is to be found not west of Vienna, but south of Bulgaria (in an orthodox Christian country). And Bulgaria, judging by its politics and economics, is no more backward than Slovakia and Hungary, which you seem to think more qualified for membership of the European Union.

Sztarcon, Virginia

VLADIMIR GARKOV

Sir—A key provision of the NATO treaty is the mutual-assistance clause, which means that an attack on one of its members will be deemed as an attack on all. This remained uncontroversial so long as it meant, in effect, the Russians crossing over the ECB; the security threat to the whole of the West would then have been plain for all to see. However, the French and the British are reluctant to extend the benefit of what is in effect a guarantee to the Poles, who have a turbulent history of quarrelling with their neighbours. Would a war between Poland and, say, Lithuania or Belarus really threaten the West's vital interests, however undesirable that war may be? This is reminiscent of the "Peace in Our Time" debate that raged throughout France during the phoney war. By the same reasoning, one should let the Czech Republic into NATO as soon as practicable, as it occupies a key strategic location within Europe—...and, critically, does not share a common border with any part of the former Soviet Union.

DOMINIC DE LA BARRE

Luxembourg d'ERQUELINNES

Star struck

Sir—Your response to the "winner-take-all" syndrome (Economist Letters, November 25th) is commendably classical. The rewards to superstars are market-determined; there is no obvious reason to suspect market failure—other than a possible prisoners' dilemma; therefore these rewards can be seen as market-clearing and mostly (socially) efficient.

But the classical economists recognised an important third factor in the price system: social justice. Modern economists should pay closer attention to the social legitimacy with which these telephone-number salaries are regarded. Earnings of sports and entertainment personalities might, perhaps, reflect the popular social esteem in which these people are held, but the same is far more difficult to argue for many business executives, securities traders and lawyers.

The overthrow of socialism may in effect have eliminated respectable concern for the perceived justice and legitimacy of our economic system. Is it beside the point, however, to reflect that this overthrow was based (inter alia) on the increasingly apparent lack of social legitimacy of the overthrow system? I suggest that society which seeks to ensure that people are worth what they are paid will ultimately outlast one that simply relies on crude market forces to pay people what they can get.

Newcastle upon Tyne

DAVID HARVEY

Israel's mission

Sir—The Polish elections help make your point about the Habsburg legacy: the more gemütlich, cosy, Catholic tech Wałęsa in the former Habsburg lands; the modern, slickly packaged Alexander Kwasniewski carried most of the rest of the country.

Amerstet, Massachusetts

JOSEPH LAKI

Heads of state

Sir—Using the frequently cited example of May Robinson, Ireland's president, Bagheri argues that the selection of a head of state need not bring in a "party hack". (November 25th). He forgets that in 1976, Cearbhall O'Dalaigh, the then president of Ireland, resigned after being called a "thug" and "terrorist" by the minister of defence for escorting his constituents right to refer a bill to the Irish Supreme Court. He was in effect driven from office by a government minister.

The question of whether we wish to dispense with the monarchic reality itself is the question of whether we wish to grant this sort of power to political parties and party leaders. Frankly, I do not think we need a referendum to discover the answer.

Oxford

VERNON BOGDANOR

Pre-war Bosnia

Sir—in your article on Bosnia (November 25th), you say that in February 1992, before the war had started, Lord Carrington and I "drafted a constitution that would have turned the country into a confederation of Swiss-style cantons. The Muslims refused to accept what they considered to be the disintegration of Bosnia." Not quite.

After several rounds of talks our "principles for future constitutional arrangements for Bosnia and Herzegovina" were agreed by the three parties (Muslim, Serb and Croat) in Sarajevo on March 19th as the basis for future negotiations. These continued, map and all, until the summer, when the Muslims rejected the agreement. Had they not done so, the Bosnian question might have been settled earlier, with less loss of [mainly Muslim] life and land.

To be fair, President Inzko and his aids were encouraged to succour that deal and to fight for a unitary Bosnian state by well-meaning outsiders who thought they knew better.

JOSE CIVILCZKO

Secretary-general

Western European Union

Brussels

EMUsing

Sir—You suggest that, as the name for an alternative European currency, "Euro" would be unanswerable ("Marked", November 18th). I disagree. In fact, it is quite in keeping with the anglophone name of its originating organisation, the EMU. As any Australian schoolchild knows, the euro is a small, endearing marsupial, such as a small wallaby. Perhaps Europe's financial bureaucrats are trying to send a subtle message?

Palo Alto

DAVID HENKEL-WALLACE