

The Edinburgh Centre of Rural Economy,
Penicuik,
Midlothian,
Scotland.

December 1st, 1986

The Letters Editor,
The Observer,
8 St Andrew's Hill,
London EC4V 5JA

Sir, - Why is there no mention of the SCOPE 28 Reports in Nigel Hawkes' article (Nov 30) on the nuclear winter? These 2 volumes, published about a year ago, were prepared for the International Council of Scientific Unions, based on the work of over 300 scientists from 30 countries, including our own. Far from discrediting earlier estimates, the SCOPE study confirms and amplifies them; indeed the authors specifically warn that "any disposition to minimize or ignore the widespread environmental effects of a nuclear war would be a fundamental disservice to the future of global civilization". Of course there were and are dissenting voices, as in any field of science, but the findings in SCOPE 28 "present a general consensus among the scientists concerned with the study".

The authors consider that the indirect consequences - notably altered climate and loss of infrastructure for agriculture and trade - could prove even more severe than the more obviously destructive direct effects of nuclear war. Even in the maritime conditions of Britain they would expect average temperatures to be 5-10°C lower in the first year, eliminating harvests not already completed. They also predict a period of several years before temperatures return to normal, so that in Canada, for instance, if average temperatures were reduced by just 3°C,

wheat would not yield at all. When the implications for food growing and importing countries of all the multiple damaging factors are taken into account, the authors sombrely conclude that "the majority of the world's population is at risk of starvation in the aftermath of a nuclear war".

Thus it is difficult to see why Mr Hawkes should seek to rubbish a 1-day international conference to be held by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, where the speakers and chairmen include the President of the Royal Society, a former Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence and the Chairman of the SCOPE Committee. Is he against this kind of informed debate that will help everyone to learn more? Must mankind not profit from its recently acquired ability to predict what may happen as a result of our actions?

Mrs Thatcher has said of the SCOPE study that "the Government will examine its findings very carefully", and we can all recognise the truth of the authors' conclusion that "it is unreasonable to expect decision-makers to develop appropriate nuclear policies when they only have an inadequate and obsolete perception of the consequences of nuclear war".

(Dr) Alan Longman,
Edinburgh.