

The human face of socialism

A SOMEWHAT protracted debate on sanctions in the French National Assembly on the second day of the Paris indaba put the conference in the right frame of mind to seriously deliberate the future of the economy, a debate which emerged as the most fruitful part of the discussion.

JCI economist Ronnie Bethlehem suggested that delegates should bury the

Africa needed a mixed economy, but the question was "how to get the mix of the mixed economy right", said Pieter le Roux of the University of the Western Cape. The present vast inequalities were the result of "apartheid on top of capitalism" and there was an urgent need for investment in human capital - which could be a form of redistribution of wealth - to secure the survival of the economy in the long-



Van Zyl Slabbert, Madame Danielle Mitterrand, Prime Minister Michel Rocard and Alex Boraine.

hatchet on sanctions as it really was "yesterday's debate". The most important issue that needed to be settled was the redistribution of wealth and growth of the economy, and "tomorrow's debate" would be the meaningful integration of South Africa's economy with that of the sub-region.

The undisputable star of the economic debate was Alec Irwin, education secretary of Numsa, who didn't mince his words and exploded a myth-a-minute as he set out to prove that labour was not intent on destroying the economy.

"We do not hide the fact that we have a socialist approach, but our concern is the development of the whole society and to do that we need a coherent approach." He identified the central areas of dispute as that of growth and ownership. On both issues capitalists had outmoded ideas, he claimed. "The important question is whether people are being employed while we grow, are we talking about caviar or food."

There was some consensus that South

term.

Le Roux said nationalisation drove the "fear of hell" into capitalists, but at issue was not so much who owns the means of production, but how to establish democratic control over the surplus.

Irwin argued strongly that neither free market capitalism nor command economy socialism could solve the critical unemployment problem, low wage levels, vast housing shortages and the housing and education crises.

Current privatisation policies would prove disastrous - what was needed was an investment policy which would ensure that companies were internationally competitive, the cost of production was lowered and employment increased.

Irwin said the labour movement was critical in its approach to socialism and had no objection to an interchange with economists to begin to fashion policies to deal with the problems of the economy. Labour was also not proposing the nationalisation of every company, but would insist that any restructuring be democratically planned.