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We must keep our tuners at home

THE NATIONAL consultation on steelbands, which began yesterday and runs over two more days at the Chaguaramas centre, has to find new answers to unemployment of panmen above all issues if it is to be a success.

An easy first step recommended by pan spokesmen is guaranteed employment for tuners. The conference heard of tuners going overseas in increasing numbers to market skills which are vitally necessary at home. It would be scandalous if tuners continued to be unable to earn a decent living in their homeland when many bands are desperate for their services.

Meeting this problem seems relatively simple. The Division of Culture in any case is the orphan child of the Establishment despite its notable efforts, and a Pan section embracing tuners and arrangers who could teach and make their services available to the bands would not be extravagant.

Many attractive ideas have been expressed in the past, but ambitious projects should not stand in the way of doing now what can be done immediately to put some of the pan men on a surer economic footing.

Today, the consultation will receive recommendations from a committee on the question of employment (musical training is the subject of a second committee report, also due today). The issue is a complex one and no one can expect overnight solutions, but the steelbands pose a challenge and an exciting opportunity to make a serious attempt to deal with a

national problem which affects the pan man more than most.

The committee's task is complicated by what one spokesman described as a surfeit of bands. Arranging for them all to make a decent living from their music plainly cannot be an immediate goal, and some certification or grading will be required from the central steelband organisation. But any steelband is too valuable a grass-roots organisation in nation building to be excluded from the efforts which we hope will emerge from the consultation to provide jobs whether inside or outside the field of music.

While there may not be many in the consultation who shared the view of the Diego Martin spokesman who suggested farming as an outlet for unemployed panmen, we hope that the idea is taken up with the band in question if no others are interested and translated into one of the projects for developing the North West Peninsula.

What is more, the steelband organisation should be vested with real authority to make a go of any such project. The possibility of failure should not prevent steps whereby we pay more than lip service to the discipline and hard work of grass roots organisations like the steelband.

The Government has imposed an unemployment levy to help the unemployed, but it can explore other means to raise funds for the steelband movement. A levy on Soul records would strike a cheerful note, or a ticket levy at shows by no means exhausts the possibilities for financing projects for the benefit of the steelband movement. Even the CDC could help in this regard.