

Repentance Postponed on Polytechnics

ONE of the conventions of British public life is that a reshuffling of ministerial posts in the government can be decently regarded as an opportunity for making small adjustments of policy. A new minister, like a new broom, can for a time act a little more freely than his predecessor, and can in the process jettison or at least modify policies which may have become less popular with the passage of time. All this is widely accepted, which is why it is a great misfortune that Mr Gerald Fowler, the new minister of state at the Department of Education and Science, has this week nailed his colours to the rickety mast of the policy on polytechnics and their place in higher education which has been evolved or at least accreted in the past few years. At the same time, in a recent article in the *Guardian*, Mr Fowler went a long way to harden the gulf which now divides the British system of higher education into two discordant parts. The way things are going, there is a serious danger of permanent damage to the system as a whole.

A convenient text for this assertion is Mr Fowler's definition of the distinction between universities and polytechnics. He says the two kinds of institutions will be "sharply differentiated", and that polytechnics will be recognized by the diversity of their student body as well as by the diversity of the courses which they offer. Mr Fowler goes on to express his hopes that the thirty polytechnics—fourteen have so far been established—will "undertake sponsored research projects" for industrial companies, although he does not think that research will ever play a very large part in the work of a polytechnic. Rather, he says, the need is to work out ways of providing a more educative and humane foundation for vocational courses of the kind which have been the traditional bread and butter of the technical colleges. Although Mr Fowler insists that he does not want "to see a gap develop" between the polytechnics and the universities, his vision of collaboration between them seems to consist of the exchange of staff or of facilities where one institution is able usefully to complement the work of the other—a valuable enough task in all conscience, but one that is hardly likely to flourish except in exceptional circumstances.

The trouble with all this is not merely that there will inevitably grow up what Mr Fowler calls a gap between the universities and the polytechnics, but that the doctrine of the binary system will project into higher education some of the inconsistencies which have

beggared British secondary education in the past few decades. How, for example, will students choose between universities and polytechnics? Will they always have a free choice, and what are the circumstances in which young men and women able to find a place for themselves at a university will voluntarily settle for a polytechnic? With the best will in the world, it is exceedingly hard to see how the innate attractions of the universities, with their cosy staff to student ratios, their facilities and their opportunities for research, will fail to skim the cream off the available supply of talent. The result, for a time at least, may well be that the student population in the polytechnics is not nearly as diverse as Mr Fowler hopes but, rather, that it will consist of those bright young men and women who have tried but failed to win a university place for themselves. It is in the circumstances a little too pious of Mr Fowler to insist that neither he nor the government will regard the polytechnics as second-class institutions—what matters, alas, is not even the truth but what the customers think. Under the present arrangements, there is a serious danger that the polytechnics will fail to attract the students and the staff which are essential to Mr Fowler's idyll.

If the new minister has not seized the chance to turn his back on these and other defects of the new proposals, what can be done? It may not be entirely outrageous to suggest that it would be possible for the universities and the polytechnics themselves to take the initiative. The objects should be plain—the integration of the divided system. Ultimately, this implies that there should be "comprehensive universities" along the lines which seem to attract the present government, but they should be built around the present universities and not separately from them. There is no reason why groups of institutions should not already make a start. The way in which the University of Manchester and the one-time Technical College (now the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology) have made a durable marriage is a good precedent which at the same time reveals how flexibility within the university system is limited not so much by the conventions of the governing bodies as by the rigidity of the academic departments. In the long run, the best way of pulling Mr Fowler's chestnuts from the fire will be some enterprising marriage or at least liaison between a traditional university and a polytechnic. The sooner, for everybody's sake, the better.