

UNIVERSITIES

Wiesner at MIT

from our Cambridge Correspondent

In an entertaining article in the *Atlantic* for April, Warren Bennis, the distinguished sociologist, describes the experience of being taken to the finishing post in a contest for the presidency of Northwestern University and then being dropped without so much as a word to tell him he didn't have the job. The story is good, but particularly memorable are his pithy comments on what it takes to be a university president in the United States these days. The turnover is alarming—most presidents of the best schools seem happy to drop out in five years as the wheels of the university grind ever finer. Bennis declares that "presidents are currently harder to find and keep than domestic help". He compares the job unfavourably with that of an ice hockey referee.

And yet American universities still unanimously believe in the post of president. The reputed half million dollars that Harvard spent in finding Professor Derek Bok testifies to that belief in the need for a chief executive. This contrasts with Britain, for example, where many academics are accustomed to vice chancellors whose greatest impact in office may be an injunction to students not to throw fireworks on Guy Fawkes day and whose greatest service is to confer degrees on a few thousand people every year. But it probably reflects a more general difference in style between the British reliance on a powerful civil service and network of high level committees and the American desire to have a helmsman and indeed at times actually to allow him to take the wheel and steer the boat himself.

In the excitement of the Harvard race, MIT's impending change seems to have created barely a ripple. Yet the next few years are going to be crucial for a school with a scientific and technological reputation unrivalled in the United States. The truth is that the decision was predictable from the start and no candidate could have mustered anything like the support that was behind Dr Jerome Wiesner, President Kennedy's scientific adviser, at present provost of MIT.

The retiring president, Dr Howard Johnson, has an enviable reputation. He is highly rated throughout the country and if there were a prize for Most Valuable President he would have it—not for fund raising abilities but for a seeming capability to satisfy most constituencies with well worked out solutions. Johnson is not a man given to bold public gestures and perhaps this has helped him during the past few years when students have rampaged. Most of MIT genuinely felt sorry when

Johnson had to encounter student confrontations—sorry rather than angry or gleeful. One student newspaper wished him charisma as a Christmas present last year. Perhaps he has been better without it.

Wiesner will obviously be a very different president, and the difference will not only be possession of charisma. Most American politicians running for election like to leave their policy statement as "you know where I stand", which saves them a lot of time and thought. Wiesner can really say that with justification. His visibility on campus, his facility at public speaking and the cogent opposition he helped organize to the ABM all speak in his favour in liberal Cambridge. Probably the only really effective arms control measure since the war—the partial test ban—came about during his time in Washington, and the problems and arguments which surround disarmament are clearly an abiding concern of his.

What will Wiesner do for MIT? During a recent interview with him, it was clear that he would play, consciously or unconsciously, a therapeutic role in the technological community. He has a clear idea of the importance of science and technology for society. This strong conviction will obviously be in considerable demand to stiffen the resolve of hard pressed scientists and to find new growth points for the institute, especially at a time when no less a luminary than I. F. Stone can write that technology is being kept in its place by the recent Senate SST rejection. He is fully aware of the times ahead. "Holding the line" was a phrase which occurred several times. Science funding is something which seems to have a periodicity and it is imperative that the institute should remain healthy for the next three or four years beyond which he had hope that a new cycle would be under way.

He voiced concern at the way funding for fashionable subjects was so fickle. A recent example of this is international studies. Money for the Center for International Studies, until a few years ago forthcoming on a large scale, was drying up. Maybe federal support on a broader level are necessary. There is, of course, no University Grants Committee in the United States, and private universities often have a job keeping up with the changing demand and fashion without ditching thoroughly viable and well established subjects.

What about the humanities at MIT? Are they viable? Wiesner spoke of a near crisis in the humanities—an identity crisis which could be compared to the perennial problem of the role of philosophy in the world of learning. In the past year or two, the humanities had come in for much criticism and

resentment for the attacks of some of their number on the institute. Wiesner will clearly have to continue to walk this tightrope for some time to come.

A ground swell of feeling in the institute, much of it fostered by the humanities, had led to the Pounds Panel and President Johnson's decision that the institute should divest itself of the Instrumentation (Draper) Laboratory, while retaining the Lincoln Laboratory attachment. Wiesner was clearly sorry to see Draper Laboratory go, however inevitable and rational it may have been, and he expressed strong hopes that a workable association could remain with Lincoln Laboratory. He was at pains to point out that the divestment decision would have been reached in the normal process of affairs and regretted the appearance that MIT was bowing to the "mindless assaults" that characterized so many campuses in 1969 and 1970.

If any city in the United States is an intellectual hotbed, it is Boston, with its 120,000 students at institutions as diverse as Harvard and Dunkin Donuts University. Could any changes be expected in MIT's relationship with other universities? He was cautious about anything closer than collaboration in individual fields. MIT has very strong links with Wellesley College and many joint programmes with other universities, notably Harvard, in expensive subjects like high energy physics and radio astronomy. But there is no thought of closer relationships, even mergers, to take advantage of the proximity of so many academics in Boston. Wiesner plainly sees competition as an important and healthy factor in the development of university research. He would like to see the various universities continue to vie amongst themselves for academic honours.

The drop in the numbers of students turning to science as a career—a much larger swing in the United States than in Great Britain, for example—did not worry him very much. He saw the quality of students as having changed little—those who were not turning to science were those who in former years had simply used science as a means of getting the degree needed for a profitable career. The students who are now staying in science are those who are really excited by it. Perhaps this is typical of Wiesner's approach to all things scientific—a confidence in the present growth and future strength of science being basically vital to society, and a firm conviction that science is still an exciting thing to do. At a time when scientists and technologists are in some indefinable way losing their status, Dr. Wiesner will have a pivotal role to play in sustaining the momentum of scientific development.