

British universities not yet free

The financial pressure on British universities has been eased in the past few weeks.

But there is a great deal to be done before the universities and the government are reconciled.

GOVERNMENTS are constitutionally incapable of confessing that they have been wrong. That is the most charitable explanation of how the British government, having declared its intention of being beastly towards British universities, is now trying to undo some of the damage it has done not by the simple device of reversing earlier decisions but by inventing entirely different policies instead. In the second half of 1980, the then new government decreed that students at British universities from outside the European Community would have to pay "economic" fees, and that the annual subvention for British universities would be reduced by 8.5 per cent over the succeeding three academic years. But now the government has set about undoing these arrangements. At the end of last year, the Secretary of State for Education and Science announced that roughly a third of the reduced budget cut would be restored, principally by encouraging universities to apply for new teaching posts, ostensibly so that they could recruit as academics some of the young people who have been kept out of the university system by the privations of the past several years. And then, last week, the Foreign Secretary (no less) announced that there will be an extra £30 million a year to help support overseas students at British universities and other institutions of higher education. This is getting on for a half of the income lost to the university system in the past few years as overseas demand has responded to market forces. But the extra funds will be used (in a way not yet specified) to help recruit overseas students from particular parts of the world — British dependencies such as Hong Kong, and countries such as Malaysia which have made a fuss.

So can British higher education — polytechnics and colleges of further education as well as universities — now relax secure in the knowledge that the government has relented? Not, it is to be hoped, for a moment. The "new blood" money is an admission that the system as a whole could be permanently damaged if the recruitment of young people, virtually at a standstill for the past five years, were still further delayed. But the new teaching posts to be created — perhaps 300 in the coming year, up to a thousand later on — will not be in the gift either of universities or of the University Grants Committee. Instead, the research councils will have a hand in deciding which applications for extra posts should succeed, while there is no assurance that universities successful in the competition for new blood will concomitantly be allowed some relief from the iniquitous student quotas which at present compromise their freedom and constrain their efficiency.

The concession on overseas students is even more of an unknown quantity. The government's objective is frankly political — to foster (or to repair) relationships with communities overseas that will yield long-term benefits to Britain. That governments should bias programmes of overseas assistance in ways like this is proper, even prudent. But, by definition, such a programme will not select those students whose presence at British universities and polytechnics is most desirable on educational grounds. Nor will it necessarily moderate the often unseemly scramble in which British universities have sought to maximize their incomes by recruiting students from overseas without scrupulous regard for their qualifications — and for the likelihood that they will benefit from the educational experience for which they are required to pay. What the universities need to fight for now is the government's recognition that even students

contribute to the well-being of educational institutions, and that there are many circumstances other than those defined by the Foreign Office in which it is to everybody's advantage that overseas students should be helped to attend British universities. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors is administering a modest scheme along these lines, but needs more money to spend.

As things are, the universities are badly placed to argue this or any other case. The British government persists in its belief that the university system is effete, and that there is still some way to go before the system is as economical and as productive as it should be. Inevitably, the response of the university system to the demands made on it is muffled, and seems grudging. But the year ahead will be filled with ructions unless some progress is made on these important issues:

● **Student grants.** The government has announced an increase for the value of these mandatory awards of only 4 per cent for 1983-84, thus rudely preempting the case the Committee of Vice-Chancellors had been preparing for a more generous increase. That one consequence will be hardship for many students is undeniable, especially because British students are less able than those elsewhere to supplement their incomes by vacation work. Yet the universities themselves remain indifferent to the government's declared need to find some way of containing the cost of student maintenance within financial limits that can be predicted in advance. The present stopgap remedy, the requirement that the university system should reduce the numbers of British students on its books, is arbitrary, leads to the waste of teaching capacity and should not be tolerated. But the universities will be able to escape from it, or some yet more fiendish arrangement, only by devising some better scheme of their own.

● **Academic tenure.** The concept of life-long tenure for established academics, widely misunderstood, has become an issue between the universities and the government. The vice-chancellors have dutifully drawn up an awkward set of proposals for the modification of tenure, the most conspicuous feature of which is that there should be an eight-year probationary period for all permanent appointments. This is both a recipe for throwing large numbers of would-have-been academics onto the labour market at an inconvenient age and a needless restraint on universities' freedom to manage their own affairs. In the long run, it would be far better to aim at smaller academic staffs, and to make fuller use of postdoctoral people and even graduate students as teachers. But even the vice-chancellors' scheme has not yet been agreed among the universities.

● **Applied research.** Part of the government's recipe for making British universities more productive appears to consist of the earmarking of research and development funds for particular fields. What is called information technology seems to head every list of priorities, including that put forward at the end of last year by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. Another large chunk of support for the same activity seems to be on the way from the Department of Industry (see page 646). The obvious danger is that the pattern of research in the university system as a whole will be unwisely distorted by these initiatives, however well intentioned. A more serious difficulty stems from the suspicion that the British government has only a naive concept of what it wants, and that experience may compel it to change course. Who, within the university system, will speak up on this contentious issue? □