French universities

Decision postponed

The 74 French universities, many of them created in the reform which followed the student rebellion of 1968, are in suspense. Does the new Socialist government love them or not?

The Minister of Education, M. Alain Savary, is keeping his own counsel. He has received representations from all sectors of the universities, from unions to presidents, since his invitation to the universities to appeal against the recently-published list of *habilitations* — a list of qualifications that each university is allowed to offer. The list was conceived largely by the previous Giscardian minister, Mme Alice Saunier-Seïté, and eliminated many old courses and refused the introduction of some new ones. A second, supplementary list was promised for last Saturday — but it did not materialize.

Now, says the ministry, it will appear at the beginning of August, when conveniently most of France is on holiday. And at the end of the vacation, M. Savary is to call unions and university presidents to a discussion, where he will attempt to reach agreement on new rules for creating university research and teaching programmes.

The implication may be that the new list will not be everything the universities want — which is approval for all the courses they propose. For defying Savary's call for self-restraint, the universities have thrown themselves solidly behind their original lists, so heavily pruned by Saunier-Seïté.

Nevertheless, they could have done little else, for Savary has given them no guidelines for what to keep and what to cut.

In the end, it may be the level of political pressure that has been brought on him that will determine which courses are approved. For example, at the Université de Haut-Bretagne (Rennes II), it appears that a course on the Breton language will be restored in the second list because of pressure from a group of Breton parliamentarians. After all, the government is pledged to respect and increase regional autonomy. And the new emphasis on the oceans (France has for the first time a minister of the sea) may save a course of oceanography at the Université de Toulon et du Var.

Savary certainly declared himself appalled at the state of university politics when he arrived in office, and it has not all been attributable to his predecessor. According to one senior scientific official, the university system had got out of hand after 1968, and needed to be trimmed. Ninety-five per cent of Saunier-Seïté's cuts were well judged, he thought.

However, such outspoken officials and heads of department may find themselves the symbolic sacrifices of the new government, to satisfy the multitude while the new politics is being thrashed out. At

the beginning of this month, one of the teaching unions (SGEN-CFDT) called for the resignation of certain heads of department who were still actively supporting Saunier-Seïté's point of view; and now it seems the Council of Ministers has a list of 27 names before it. These counter-revolutionaries may have to go, it is implied.

Robert Walgate

UK nuclear energy

Maintaining course

The British government remains convinced of the wisdom of its nuclear policy in spite of criticism from the House of Commons Select Committee on Energy in a report published earlier this year (see *Nature* 19 February, p.621). In a reply to that report, released last week (*Nuclear Power*, Cmnd 8317, HMSO, £2.30), the Department of Energy reiterates its belief that Britain could need 20 GW of new electricity generating capacity by the year 2000 and should go ahead with the programme, outlined in 1979, to order one new nuclear reactor a year for the next decade (15 GW in all). But it agrees with the select committee that the programme should be flexible and that each new order should be assessed on its merits.

The government is, however, sceptical of the select committee's suggestion that the £15,000 million that the programme is expected to cost might be better spent on conservation, saying that the relative benefits of investing in new plant and in conservation are too difficult to estimate. But it has accepted the recommendation that the planning margins of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), 28 per cent, should be reconsidered and has charged the Electricity Council with the task. On the contentious question of estimating future electricity demand, it says that it must rely on its own estimates and those of the Central Electricity Generating Board, the latest of which assume a growth rate in the economy of 1 per cent a year until the end of the century. Some of the estimates are due to be updated.

The select committee was particularly disturbed when it came to assess the nuclear programme on economic grounds. It shared the concern of a subsequent Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on CEGB over the way the board has estimated future capital costs from historic costs. The government agrees that this is an unreliable way of appraising future investment and, taking its cue more from the Monopolies Commission than from the select committee, has asked CEGB for improvements in its investment analysis. It has also asked for reassessments of assumptions about future coal prices and availability, power station construction times and costs and the performance of advanced gas-cooled reactors.

No change is planned, however, to the

structure of the nuclear power industry, nor does the government intend to implement the select committee's recommendations for broadening its advice on nuclear matters. But the Secretary of State is already looking at ways of attracting suitable staff to the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate.

The government is still set for a public inquiry in 1982 into the siting of Britain's first pressurized water reactor, intended to start off the new programme, at Sizewell in Suffolk. Although the precise details of the inquiry have yet to be released, Sir Frank Layfield, QC, who chaired an inquiry into local government finance in 1974, was appointed its inspector last week. The government will not, however, expect the inquiry to examine the merits of the pressurized water reactor relative to CANDU, the Canadian heavy water reactor. It rejected the select committee's recommendation for an urgent new appraisal of CANDU on the grounds that the costs of adapting it to British conditions would be too high at this stage.

Judy Redfearn

Science education funding

Pressing claims

Washington

In one of his first acts as the new president of the National Academy of Sciences, Dr Frank Press, formerly director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy under President Carter, has strongly criticized the cuts in federal support for science education that have been proposed by the Reagan Administration.

Dr Press's comments on the proposed cuts, which would virtually eliminate funding for science education from the National Science Foundation (NSF), were contained in a letter to the chairman of the House of Representatives Science and Technology Committee, Mr Don Fuqua. And the letter, together with similar complaints voiced by individuals and institutions from across the country, seems to have had an effect.

Last week, the House voted to approve a 1982 budget for NSF which included an additional \$35 million for science education in excess of the Administration's request. In the process, the Democrat-controlled body rejected by 264 votes to 152 an attempt by Republicans to remove this extra money from the NSF appropriations bill and reduce the foundation's total budget to the \$1,033 million proposed by President Reagan.

Although the House vote may prove to be critical in restoring the science education funds, there is still some way to go. Also last week the Senate appropriations committee approved a budget of \$1,044 million for NSF, which includes an additional \$20 million for science education; if accepted by the full Senate, the subsequent compromise with the