named, has already had an effect. Pressure from the local union branch at the University of Aston in Birmingham persuaded the university to postpone compulsory redundancies at least until the next academic year. Local pressure also persuaded the University of Keele to withdraw its notification of 300 impending redundancies to the Department of Employment. Other universities have also decided to delay job losses in an attempt to avoid being the first to be dragged through the courts. A handful are also apparently planning not to balance their books for several years. Their policy of living on borrowed money perhaps for three or four years is favoured by the AUT.

Judy Redfearn

Science research council

Paying a price

The capacity of the Science and Engineering Research Council to make research grants to British academics is likely to be impaired, in the year immediately ahead, because of the over-spending by the council's Science Board, in the financial year that ended on 31 March. One of the ironies of this situation, described in the council's annual report for 1980-81, published last week, is that the chairman of the offending board, Professor John Kingman, has now succeeded Sir Geoffrey Allen as chairman of the council.

Kingman — poacher to gamekeeper?

According to the report, the council's allocation of funds to the science board will be reduced in the current year, while the board must repay to its master the outstanding amount of its over-spending.

The over-spending occurred, according to Professor Kingman, when the council decided to adopt a more bullish attitude to its spending to avoid falling into the trap of having money that it had not spent taken away by the government. In the event, it over-stepped the mark and received a sharp rap over the knuckles from the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee and a warning not to over-spend again.

Professor Kingman is confident that the council can do better this year. He expects spending to be within 0.15 per cent of the budget, the margin allowed by the Treasury, which he nevertheless complains is too narrow and would never be expected

in industry.

Although the science board over-spent by only a small fraction of its annual budget (£64.4 million in 1980-81), the effect on its activities has been marked. During 1980-81, the announcement of some research grants to universities had to be delayed for lack of funds. The repayments this year and next will also not help the board meet its future commitments, about one-third of which are to research and teaching in universities.

According to the annual report, support for university research, a third of which is channelled through the science board, had to be cut somewhat during 1980-81. Matters this year are complicated by the cut in university income which is increasing pressure on the council's research grants.

But the report, for which Sir Geoffrey Allen is responsible, says that spending on research grants should soon be restored at least to the level of recent years. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the council will be able to support all grant applications given its highest merit grading of alpha.

The council, in 1980-82, spent £56.5 million on research grants out of its total budget of £207.8 million. A few more grants were awarded than in the previous year but the increase was due almost entirely to an unusually large number of requests for continuing support in some areas. A total of 1,983 research grants, valued at £74.5 million, were recommended in 1980-81 compared with 2,412 awarded in 1979-80.

Judy Redfearn

New man in

Within a week of the resignation of the president and director-general of the French research agency, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) (*Nature* 5 November, p.3), a new director-general has been appointed: the long-time socialist party member M. Jean-Jacques Payan, a 46-year-old mathematician, and president of the University of Grenoble I.

The presidency of CNRS remains unfilled, although constitutionally the president has to help select the director-general. However, the director-general bears the main management load, and so the filling of this post was considered the more urgent.

M. Payan's first task will be to re-establish confidence in the CNRS management, to represent CNRS in the national colloquium on science and technology (which takes place in January) and to consider the reorganization of CNRS — particularly taking into account the strongly expressed wish of the engineers, technicians and administrators of the many CNRS laboratories to play a more significant role in policy-making.

Robert Walgate

German energy policy

The future unclear

Count Otto Lambsdorff, the West German economics minister, was balanced on a precarious political tight-rope last week, when he announced the governing coalition's energy policy for the next decade. Judging by his description of the "third continuation of the energy programme" (the second continuation was in 1977), he had little money, little energy and few plans. Or at least he had few plans he would admit to, for fear of rocking the coalition.

For example, to prepare the third continuation, Lambsdorff had asked several German economic institutes to make forecasts of energy needs and production. Usually a government will give guideline projections for the total economy in such circumstances; but Lambsdorff could not or would not provide them. And while the institutes clearly recommended a quadrupling of nuclear power generation by 1995 (from 3.7 per cent of primary energy to 17 per cent), Lambsdorff would only commit himself to the remark that "nuclear energy must provide an increasing percentage of baseload electricity".

Several factors lie behind this imprecision — strong local opposition within the Social Democratic Party (SDP), one of the coalition partners, to the expansion of nuclear power; the possible retirement of Chancellor Schmidt through ill-health before the 1984 general elections, complicated by the lack of an obvious successor; and the forthcoming fight in the local government elections next year, when SDP must present as united a front as it can.

Were it not for these political complications, the government would no doubt like to commit itself firmly to cheap nuclear power, which — behind the scenes — it sees as essential for maintaining the competitiveness of German industry. But if nuclear power is to be cheap, it must be plentiful, goes the calculation. A new German 1,300-MW pressurized water nuclear power station would cost nearly twice as much in Germany as in France, a German manufacturer claimed recently. According to the company, this is largely because the French companies were "tooled up" for long production runs, and environmental regulations and delays are less extreme in France. At best, nuclear power might contribute 25 per cent of German electricity by the mid-1980s, compared with France's 70 per cent by 1990, the company estimated.

Nevertheless, it is not good politics in SDP at present to be seen to be a strong supporter of nuclear power, in spite of the fact that there seems recently to have been a change of mood among the German public. Germany's strong dependence on oil and gas keeps domestic energy prices high, and the nuclear industry's claims that

nuclear power can be cheap is winning adherents.

Last week, however, Lambsdorff did commit himself to one change of policy. Like all Western ministers, he needs to save money during the world recession. Some of it will come from the coal industry — heavily subsidized in Germany to make its price competitive with the imported variety. These subsidies will be reduced, and cheaper coal imported. Germany should also shift away from burning "brown coal", and use it to provide chemical feedstocks. The missing energy would be provided by nuclear power.

●The German government would not be deflected from its commitment to a DM 10,000 million (£2,400 million) deal with the Soviet Union to provide Western Europe with natural gas through an overland pipeline from Siberia, Lambsdorff said last week. The deal would provide West Germany with around 12,000 million cubic metres a year, 30 per cent of its natural gas requirements. A large fraction of this gas will be used to produce electricity. Natural gas power stations at present produce 50 per cent more electricity in Germany than do nuclear stations.

Robert Walgate

UK Government Chemist

New broom

The Laboratory of the Government Chemist, for long a respected but retiring establishment, may yet emerge from the shadows. For Dr Ronald Coleman, who will take over as Government Chemist when Dr Harold Egan retires at the end of December, intends that the laboratory should play a more central part in British science.

The laboratory, which employs about 400 people, provides a wide range of analytical services, mainly for the public sector. Thus it is concerned with the estimation of additives in foods and the characterization of oil-spill samples for correlation with suspected sources of pollution. Although supported by the Department of Industry, the laboratory is paid for specific services by government departments and local authorities. The laboratory has few dealings with the private sector and its research is largely that required to keep abreast of new analytical techniques.

Dr Coleman plans to change all this. He intends to broaden the remit of the laboratory, to make it "more open" and to

Coleman — talking change

forge links with both industry and the universities.

Dr Coleman would like the laboratory to "have a finger in more pies". In its analytical work he would like the laboratory to branch out into work on surface chemistry and on-line instrumentation. Mr Coleman himself has just been given responsibility for biotechnology in the Biotechnology Directorate set up last month, but the laboratory's role in this new venture remains to be determined.

Dr Coleman is also ambitiously planning coordinated programmes with industry, hoping that the laboratory could contribute technical expertise and industry the necessary funds. He has already talked to five interested industrial companies.

Dr Coleman points to his varied experience. At present he is deputy director of the National Physical Laboratory, but his career began with five years in the glass industry. His twenty-year spell with the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority involved work with nuclear energy, forensic science, geochemistry and biotechnology.

Isobel Collins

Polish science

Academy for change

Warsaw

Self-governance, the move towards "social control" of all sectors of public life, will undoubtedly bring considerable changes in the structure of Polish research planning. In particular, there have been vocal demands, coming especially from the scientists' lobby within the free trade union Solidarity, for parity of status between the universities and other higher educational institutions, the Academy of Sciences and its subsidiary institutes, and the institutes belonging to the production ministries (including the ministries of agriculture, fisheries and mining).

Funding tends to be less generous in the academy institutes than in those belonging to the ministries, many of which, it has been suggested, were founded more for reasons of prestige than for any real

research need. Although with Poland's newly-admitted unemployment problems — particularly among young graduates — closures are unlikely, a thorough-going reconsideration of the pattern of research is expected. Any moves from the top to start making changes would, however, run the risk of conflicting with the demand — expressed by the recent Solidarity congress — that scientists should have more say in choosing their own research topics.

Another Solidarity recommendation calls for the elimination of the barriers between the academy and the rest of the academic community. During the past few years the various academy institutes have become havens for young academics prevented from taking teaching posts for political reasons, and one of the changes suggested by Solidarity would be to allow scientists working at academy institutes to lecture to university students.

At the same time, there is considerable unrest both inside and outside Solidarity about the present anomalous status of the academy as a quasi-ministry, with its academic secretary responsible not to the academy but directly to the prime minister. A spirited debate, on this and other points, is expected when the general assembly of the academy meets in December, chiefly to debate the proposed new legislation on the academy.

A new bill on higher education is already on its way to becoming law, and (following the protests and strike-threats of last September) it now has the basic consent of the academic community.

Vera Rich

Californian Medflies

Brief armistice

Sacramento, California

Aerial spraying against the infestation of the Mediterranean fruit fly, now much curtailed for the duration of what Californians laughably call the winter, is likely to be resumed in earnest in the spring. But Mr Richard Rominger, director of the state Department of Food and Agriculture, told his Advisory Committee on Thursday last week that enough insect traps have been installed in the northern counties for next year's campaign to be effective.

Meanwhile, fruit farmers in Florida and Texas as well as California are more concerned with an unexpected consequence of the Californian campaign against the Medfly. The practice of fumigating fruit from affected areas of California with ethylene dibromide has raised environmental objections in Japan, one of the chief markets for United States fruit exports, and has also drawn attention to widespread use of ethylene dibromide for fumigating fruit from Florida and Texas (where other pests, such as the Mexican fruit fly, are common). Mr Rominger was hoping, last week, that the Japanese authorities would now accept as safe the Californian requirement that fumigated

Asian mycotoxins

In the story "Yellow rain: Waiting for data", *Nature* 22 October p.598, it was mistakenly stated that a sample of vegetation had been taken from Laos for analysis. In fact it was taken from Kampuchea.