Polish universities

Government legislation unwanted

Warsaw

THE "public debate" over Poland's 1982 Higher Education Act is becoming, more and more, an open confrontation between the universities and the government. A referendum last week among academic staff at Warsaw University gave an overwhelming vote of "no" to the proposed changes. (More than 75 per cent were against the reduction of the size of the senate, and more than 80 per cent against all other reforms.) A similar referendum among the students, now in progress, seems likely to give even more conclusive results. Yet the votes are unlikely to make any real difference. The government, it is believed, will simply push through the changes.

According to those who oppose the reforms, the changes would effectively annul the academic autonomy gained in the Solidarity period. Rectors and deans, at present elected, would be nominated by the Minister of Science and Higher Education, who would also have wide powers to suspend or dismiss staff, students and academic bodies. Political as well as professorial considerations would be taken into account in hiring university staff, and the "students' self-government committees" would be replaced by new bodies, based on the party-linked youth organizations.

The government case is that, since the state supports the universities, the state has a right to decide what goes on in them, and, in particular, to ensure that they are not used for anti-socialist purposes. The proposed changes in the act would therefore stress the explicitly "socialist" nature of Polish education, and wide disciplinary powers in the case of alleged "anti-socialist action"

by staff or students. (The definition of such action will, it appears, be wide according to sources in Warsaw Polytechnic. The rector of that institution is under pressure from the ministry to discipline students who carried the polytechnic's banner in the funeral procession of the murdered pro-Solidarity priest Father Jerzy Popieluszko, last autumn.) All that is happening, one ministry spokesman tried to explain, is that the Committee for Social and Political Affairs if trying to plug a few loopholes in the 1982 act, which have been used by opponents to destabilize the universities.

The academics, on the other hand, maintain that nothing is more likely to destabilize the universities than constantly changing the law.

The Main Council of Higher Education (which consists of one delegate from every university and higher college in Poland, with the exception of the Catholic University of Lublin) has repeatedly made the point that the present act should be allowed to run for the term of office of the rectors elected in 1984 (until 1987), before any changes are discussed.

One scholar formerly active in the unofficial Society of Academic Courses, the "Flying University" of the late 1970s, went so far as to say that what is at stake is not the election versus appointment of rectors, nor the existence of the "student self-government committees", nor even the right of the minister to suspend or dismiss recalcitrant staff or students. "What we are fighting for", he said, "is to ensure that the government cannot simply change the law every time it wants to interfere in the universities".

Vera Rich

UK research

Joseph warns of trouble ahead

THE whole of the British research establishment spent two hours at the Savoy Hotel last week to hear Sir Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, deliver a speech whose preparation cannot have taken nearly as much time as that needed to feed the multitude. He was speaking at the annual luncheon of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee.

Sir Keith had three points to make, of which the clearest was that the scientific community should address itself to the "moral dilemmas" occasioned by new developments in research. He said that the parliamentary bill introduced by Mr Enoch Powell MP, which would ban the use of human embryos for any purpose other than the treatment of infertility, is only "an introduction" to the troubles that lie ahead.

On support for research by the government, Sir Keith said that his partially successful attempt to transfer funds from student maintenance grants to research sup-

port had broken new ground by uniting all sections of his party in opposition. He went on to chide scientists in his audience because, he said, among the "uncounted" letters of protest about student grants, there had so far been found none — "not one" — applauding his attempt to increase research support.

Borrowing from C.P. Snow, Sir Keith also wrung his hands last week over what he called "the two cultures" of "science and trade". He complained of the "suicidal snobbery of academic attitudes" towards trade, arguing that the stagnation of British support for research is a consequence of poor economic growth in recent years.

But Sir Keith said there are now "harbingers of improvement" to be found both in the rate at which new enterprises are being created in Britain and in developments such as that of the complex of science-based industries recently grown up around Cambridge.

John Maddox

British AIDS

New cases cause alarm

SINCE the summer of 1982, 132 cases of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) have been diagnosed in Britain, 58 of which have proved fatal. But not until last month was public anxiety about the disease fanned, following the publicity given to the death of a prison chaplain.

The Department of Health has now set up an expert advisory group representing science and medicine and public health services. The disease has not been made notifiable, although patients with AIDS are reported to the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre by their doctors. Government policy is fivefold:

- Guidelines for all health professionals.
- Health Education Council leaflets to promote public awareness of the disease particularly among "at risk" groups (male homosexuals and intravenous drug abusers).
- Safeguarding of recipients of blood and blood products. Blood transfusion centres are distributing widely a leaflet *AIDS: Important New Advice for Blood Donors*; the British AIDS charity (the Terence Higgins Trust) and the Blood Transfusion Service are asking "at risk" people not to give blood.
- Development of tests to screen blood donations for the AIDS virus antibody.
- Speeding-up of the programme to produce heat-treated factor VIII (the blood-clotting factor) used to treat haemophiliacs. The Haemophilia Society is selling a comprehensive booklet about AIDS.

The government's financial commitment to AIDS research consists of £158,000 from the Medical Research Council (MRC) over three years (from October 1984), supplemented by £15,000 a year from the health department. MRC has also committed £27,000 for two years (with £7,000 a year extra from the health department) for research on the relationship of AIDS to patients with blood disorders. The US AIDS research budget is \$86 million a year (see *Nature* 28 February, p.725).

The AIDS virus has been isolated independently in three different laboratories and has been variously named the lymphadenopathy-associated virus (LAV), human T-cell leukaemia/lymphoma virus (HTLV) type III or AIDS-associated retrovirus (ARV). It is now recognized that all three are variants of the same virus (see *Nature* 313, 636 and 743; 1985) whose nucleotide sequences differ by 1 per cent and whose genetic organization is identical. The AIDS virus is thought not to be a member of the HTLV family of retroviruses, but to represent a new class.

According to Department of Health figures, 90 per cent of deaths due to AIDS in Britain have been male homosexuals of average age 36.

Maxine Clarke