

## Can British universities recover?

*The British government seems to be repenting its six years of meanness towards higher education, but the decay it engendered may by now be irreparable.*

CURIOUS things are happening in British higher education. Suddenly, again, access is the cry. That, at least, was one of the themes with which Mr Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education and Science for the past four months, tempted university vice-chancellors at their annual retreat last week (see page 383). Does not Britain need more skilled people, of the kind that universities might train. Is not the prospective decline of the late teenage groups an opportunity to cast the net of education wider? And what is this depressed talk of having to close one or more universities for lack of funds? Mr Baker, always emollient, seems to have been almost chirpy. Many in his audience, hearing their own arguments advanced by their paymaster, must have wondered whether they had been dreaming all those years. The beginning of the new term (these things start late in Britain) will remind them that their nightmare has been reality as well.

Mr Baker may unintentionally have prolonged the agony by acknowledging that British universities need more money to stay afloat and then going on to deal chiefly with the mechanism by which students might be supported. True, he half-promised that there will be more money in next year's budget, for which many people will be grateful. But, for at least the third time since it was first elected in 1979 the British Government is once again dicker with schemes for supporting students by means of loans. Mr George Walden, an able colleague of Mr Baker's, is well launched into an enquiry on the subject. But to judge from the hints Mr Baker dropped last week the government is thinking dangerously big.

It is one thing to devise a scheme by which the costs of maintaining students in higher education can be met by some mixture of grants and loans, and quite another thing to talk (as Mr Baker did) of shuffling off a substantial part of the cost of running universities onto the employers of university graduates. The former would have the advantage of freeing the government from the need to write a cheque each year determined by the numbers of students in higher education; the second would have the disadvantage of giving employers an unreasonable influence over the lives and working conditions of university-leavers. For at least as long as Britain remains as impoverished as it is, the government has no equitable choice but to meet the core costs of higher education out of taxpayers' resources. That could change, but only if universities first prosper.

What are the chances of that? Not bright. Although Mr Baker went last week as far as could reasonably be expected of a government minister to disavow the policies of his predecessor, Sir Keith Joseph, even to the extent of acknowledging that last year's policy document on the future of higher education was disastrous, he may not yet be fully aware of how six years of attrition have undermined the system he now wishes to encourage. Too many able academics have been lost to the system, while the long period in which new recruitment has been impossible has robbed universities of their necessary complement of intellectual subversives. The consequences are apparent to all who spend time counting the places within the British university system at which innovative people prosper; fewer fingers are needed as the years go by. It could be that there are already too

few places at which outstanding research is practised for the British system as a whole to have the vitality to sustain Mr Baker's rediscovered goals.

The best hope is that the universities themselves will come to recognize that they have an interest in, and a responsibility for, their own survival. On the narrow question of student maintenance, it has taken them ten years (until now) to acknowledge that the government has had a good case for shading the principle of a grant for everybody with a place in higher education. They would have won a better deal if they had said so sooner. Even now, while struggling with the government's spate of requests for better management, fuller accountability, less tenure and better student behaviour (under the legend of "free speech"), the universities wishing to survive should recognize that that prize will go to those with the wit to take the initiative. One immediate objective should be a measure of financial integrity. Too many universities in Britain are over-spending their over-modest budgets in ways that put them in hock to the University Grants Committee and even, on some occasions, the commercial banks; no institution can expect to make an independent way in the world in such a condition. Further ahead, universities need a measure of the autonomy most of them at present lack. In practice, what this means is that they should be more free to teach what they deliberately decide they must teach, and that they will pursue research in the fields best suited to the talents and interests of their members. Present circumstances cramp this freedom, but British universities have been extraordinarily compliant of these restraints. Is that another sign that the stuffing has gone out of them? □

## Ideal undermines good

*The Soviet Union gives the United States too little credit for a shift on arms control.*

FOR most of this year, the Soviet Union has made most of the running in progress towards arms control, portraying the United States as a laggard in the process, but last week's performances at the United Nations by President Reagan (on Monday) and Mr Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet Foreign Minister (on Tuesday), may have tilted the balance the other way. As on previous occasions, but through a different spokesman, the Soviet Union hotly rejected President Reagan's statement of the present position of the United States on arms control as so much "propaganda". That is unfortunate because Mr Reagan's speech embodies signs of change and relaxation on at least two important issues, the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) and the prospects for a nuclear test-ban. In neither case were the US concessions enough to bridge the well-known gap between the United States and the Soviet Union, but that does not imply that they are negligible.

On SDI, the present position is that Soviet Union has asked for a 15-year extension of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (which would prohibit the deployment of SDI weapons), but has said that laboratory research on defences against ballistic mis-