

Belfast university promises commitment to neutrality . . .

Paris. Northern Ireland's oldest and largest university, the Queen's University of Belfast, is to discontinue the playing of the United Kingdom's national anthem, 'God Save the Queen', at graduation ceremonies, and to replace it with Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy', the anthem of the European Union.

The change is one of a number of measures being taken by the university to promote a "neutral working and social environment". These mark a major shift in the university's position on the conflict in Northern Ireland, according to Professor Lesley Clarkson, who is senior pro-vice chancellor, and also chairman of the university's equal opportunities group.

The measures were adopted by the university's Senate last month on the recommendation of a special advisory group set up as a result of an independent investigation in 1993 into employment practices at the university, which confirmed that the university had discriminated against Roman Catholics and also prompted a review of recruitment practices (see *Nature* 363, 475; 1993).

As a further symbol of its desire to demonstrate its neutrality, the university Senate also decided that the band of the Royal Ulster Constabulary — the largely Protestant police force which has traditionally provided entertainment at graduation garden parties — "should be seen as one of a number of suitable bands, rather than the only one".

The significance of these changes stems from the fact that the terms 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' denote two communities with different political aspirations; much of the Catholic minority favours a United Ireland, while much of the Protestant majority wants Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom.

In recent years, the number of Catholic students at Queen's has overtaken that of Protestants, and official signs in the student's union are now displayed in both

English and Irish. The special advisory group points out that some students perceive this practice as 'divisive', and recommends that such signs be "used and identified as cultural rather than political symbols."

The advisory group also recommends that the university should promote both the 'Ulster/British' and 'Irish' cultures, and also take an active role in promoting peace. Encouraging cosmopolitanism — and a European dimension, in particular — in all university activities, it adds, may help to diffuse tensions by broadening "perspectives" beyond the "narrow confines" of Northern Ireland.

Such changes represent an important shift for a university that Clarkson admits has "held itself aloof from the troubles" for a quarter of a century. Indeed, those working on the campus, which is sited in the leafy suburbs of south Belfast, have been able to remain oblivious to, or at least sheltered from, the widespread violence in, for example, the terraced-house ghettos less than 2 km to the west.

But Clarkson also admits that "hanging on to divisive emblems is not furthering the work of the university". He says that the university's plans to reassert itself politically have been given added momentum by the current peace negotiations, which were prompted by the announcement of a ceasefire last year by both the Catholic Irish Republican Army (IRA), and Protestant terrorist groups.

The university's new policies have attracted the wrath of Protestant politicians. James Molyneux, the leader of the moderate Ulster Unionist party, for example, last week rejected an honorary doctorate from the university in protest at the university's decision to scrap the national anthem. Clarkson says he is "saddened" but "not surprised" by the attitudes of Protestant parties.

Declan Butler

. . . as US aims to boost science links

Paris. The United States is expected to announce a package of measures to promote the transfer of US research and technology to Northern Ireland at a special conference for trade and investment in Ireland which is to be held in Philadelphia in April.

The package is being developed by a working group set up jointly by the US Department of Commerce's Technology Administration and the Industrial Research and Technology Unit of Northern Ireland's Department of Economic Development. It is expected, in particular, to

provide the province with favoured access to US technology and to link Irish science centres with corresponding organizations in the United States.

The US administration has said it considers such cooperation vital to "supporting peace" in the province by encouraging economic growth. In a further sign of confidence in the peace process, the company Du Pont announced last month that it is to invest £13.5 million (US\$ 21million) on developing prototype textile technologies at its Lycra facility in Derry.

D.B.

Patent changes in India clear path for US accord

New Delhi. India last week issued a presidential decree proposing that the country's patent law be amended to allow patents on novel products. At present, legislation passed in 1970 authorizes patents only on processes, allowing India to avoid paying royalties on drugs and chemicals patented elsewhere simply by developing new processes for their production.

The presidential decree, according to a US official, will clear the way for the signing of an 'omnibus' science agreement with the United States, first submitted to the Indian government for approval two years ago, but left to gather dust because of the disagreement over patent legislation.

India's current patent laws have enabled it, for example, to manufacture the chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) substitute without paying royalties to the company Dupont, which holds a patent. But the country has been obliged to make the change as part of its acceptance last year of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

The change will be welcomed by the United States, which estimates that poor patent protection in India has caused enormous damage to US trade.

But not everyone is happy about the new decree. Critics argue that any gains in health and food production will be offset by large increases in the price of drugs and agrochemicals. Furthermore, Indian drug companies stand to lose much of their 60 per cent share of the domestic market to multinational companies.

Observers outside the drug industry agree that the lack of patent protection on products has stifled innovation. Indeed, the number of patents granted in India fell from more than 40,000 to around 12,000 between 1968 and 1988. Indian innovators have also tended to patent their inventions abroad.

The change will boost research and development, says Mahesh Prasad Bhatnagar, a legal expert at the National Research Development Corporation, the body responsible for exploiting domestic technologies.

Although the new patent regime will pit small Indian companies against multinationals, it will also contain safeguards to protect public interest, such as giving greater discretionary powers to the patent office. India will also benefit from a 10-year transition period agreed with the World Trade Organization.

But before the decree becomes law it must first be ratified by both houses of parliament. The opposition parties are divided on the issue. But the ruling Congress party is in a minority in one of the houses, and observers predict that the amendment will have a rough ride.

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