

OLD WORLD

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

University Teachers Unite

THE waves of indignation which spread through some British universities over the so-called Atkinson affair have not yet spent all their energy. A conference to establish a Council for Academic Freedom, linked with the National Council for Civil Liberties, will be held at Imperial College, London on October 3. The aims of the proposed organization are to protect the rights of academic staff to express political opinions without fear of academic reprisals, and it has clearly been prompted by the decision of the academic appointments board at the University of Birmingham to reject the nomination of Mr Dick Atkinson for reasons which Mr Atkinson's supporters claim are not entirely academic. Mr Atkinson, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Manchester, applied for a post at Birmingham last July.

The conference on October 3 will have before it seven proposals, including a statement of the aims of the proposed council "to defend and promote academic freedom in universities and all other institutions of higher education, to inform its members of cases where academic freedom has been breached or is threatened, to take whatever action is appropriate in such cases, and to promote the publication of other information related to academic freedom". Invitations to take part in the conference have been sent out to some 500 academic staff, and Professor Norman Dorsen, a member of the General Council of the American Civil Liberties Union, has been invited to speak.

The council will function under the auspices of the National Council for Civil Liberties, although it will be autonomous as far as policy making is concerned. The idea clearly is to use the machinery of the NCCL—particularly the NCCL's lawyers—to operate the council and in return the NCCL will gain an influx of new members. Members of the Council for Academic Freedom will therefore have to pay the usual membership fee for the NCCL, in addition to an annual fee of 10s.

The council will be run by a committee consisting of ten members elected by the conference and three members nominated by the NCCL, of whom one will be the general secretary, Mr Tony Smythe. Membership will consist chiefly of teaching staff in higher education, but it will also be open to "other interested persons".

The Association of University Teachers, which in the past has been the body chiefly concerned with the rights of university teaching staff, is lukewarm about the proposed council. Mr Laurie Sapper, general secretary of the AUT, said that "if the people who are hoping to set this organization up were willing to put as much energy into making the AUT work more effectively, there would be no need for such a body". Mr Sapper also pointed out that last year the AUT spent £2,000 on legal costs incurred in fighting the dismissal of three lecturers, one of whom was Mr Robin Blackburn who was dismissed by the London School of Economics for his part in the disturbances there.

On the other hand, Professor John Griffith, of the London School of Economics—one of the prime

movers behind the proposed council—believes that the "AUT's heart is in the right place, but it doesn't actually do very much". The council will be anxious, however, to cooperate with the AUT, the Association of Teachers in Technical Institutions and the National Union of Students. Other sponsors of the council include Professor David Epstein of the University of Warwick, Professor David Glass of LSE, Professor Peter Townsend of the University of Essex and Professor Peter Worsley of the University of Manchester.

RESEARCH COUNCILS

NERC Grows On

THE report of the Natural Environment Research Council for the year ending on March 31 (HMSO, 13s) is a cheerful record of growth on the rising part of a sigmoid curve. The council estimates that in the past year, it spent £11.84 million. As always, the Natural Environment Research Council chooses to spend a high proportion of its resources on the organizations such as the Nature Conservancy which it inherited at its inception or which it has since set up on its own. Research grants and training awards account for only £1.84 million, just over 15 per cent of the total. Although a great deal of this imbalance may be explained by the high cost of operating the common facilities such as research vessels, it will no doubt be a considerable disappointment to academics that only £1.25 million found its way into universities. In the year just past, the luckiest universities were Cambridge (£0.11 million) and Imperial College, London (£0.096 million). At the other end of the scale, the University of Surrey was granted £877 for research and Chelsea College of Science and Technology less than half of that.

The council's report says that there has been a "considerable evolution" in its policy towards post-graduate research at the universities. What seems to be implied is that the council is trying to develop a strategy for research based on the collective views of university departments about the directions most likely to be profitable. The report says that the council plans to increase its allocation of funds to university research "if the flow of applications for worthwhile projects is sustained" by about 6 per cent a year.

Pollution and the environment are two of the matters on which the council is concerned. The report says that the council has in mind a long term programme of research consisting of systematic ecological surveys intended to throw up evidence of changes brought about by pollutants, experimental studies of the biological effects of specific pollutants, especially at chronic doses, and research on the persistence and degradation of biological contaminants.

ROCKETRY

European Space after Apollo

from a Correspondent

LORD BESSBOROUGH, Minister of State at the Ministry of Technology with responsibility for aerospace matters, is leading the British representation that is taking part in the European Space Conference (ESC) mission to