

OLD WORLD

ATOMIC ENERGY AUTHORITY

Quiet Before the Storm

THE annual report of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, published last week (HMSO, 17s), has cheerful things to say about fusion. At the Culham laboratory, for example, joint Anglo-Russian experiments on the Russian Tokamak device have raised hopes that a fusion reactor may be more than a fantasy, and progress has been encouraging on several other aspects of closed line systems at Culham. Yet funds for Culham continue to be cut in accordance with decisions made several years ago, even though, as the report puts it, "progress fully justifies the maintenance of a strong and viable programme in the United Kingdom".

The chief preoccupation of the AEA remains the development of new reactor systems, on which it spent £43.3 million last year, compared with £41.3 million in 1968-9. Of this, 62 per cent was spent on the fast reactor programme and 20 per cent on water cooled systems. Sir John Hill, chairman of the AEA, emphasized in London last week that the AEA was keen that the first commercial fast reactor should be large enough to be replicated without major modifications. He thought that construction work on the first fast reactor power station would probably start in 1974.

On water cooled systems, the report recalls that the AEA provided the nuclear design and construction consortia with plans for a commercial 450 MW steam generating heavy water reactor. But there is no mention of the gloomy commercial forecasts for the SGHWR, which is beginning to look more like the AEA's answer to Concorde with every month that passes. The Radiochemical Centre at Amersham increased its profit last year by 22 per cent, of which about 60 per cent was from exports. This may encourage the new government to take up the threads of the fuel bill prepared by Mr Wedgwood Benn, former Minister of Technology, in which the Radiochemical Centre was seen as the backbone of one company and the plants at Springfields, Capenhurst and Windscale were to be the focus of a second company, British Nuclear Fuels.

One point which is hardly clarified in the report is the extent to which the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston has kept pace with the changing orientation of the AEA. An over-enthusiasm for classifying projects of very marginal secrecy may have hampered progress in fields such as computer applications in engineering, in which the AERE has considerable experience. A computer system for the control of machine tools, for example, had to make its way to the open market through the workshops at AERE, Harwell.

Both the total expenditure and number of staff at the AEA fell last year, although for quite different reasons. The drop in expenditure of about £7 million is attributed chiefly to the delay in completion of the prototype fast reactor at Dounreay and to deferment of purchases of plutonium for fabrication of its fuel. The reduction of staff has continued consistently since 1961, standing now at 30,000 or 10,000 less than in 1961. This represents a drop of 1,300 in the past year, partly due to transfers to the design and construction companies.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Law of Protest

by our Education Correspondent

A REPORT that defines the legal rights of students within an institution of higher education has been published this week by the National Union of Students and the National Council for Civil Liberties (*Academic Freedom and the Law*, NUS, 10s). The chief recommendation is that every student should enter into a legally binding contract with his college or university guaranteeing certain rights and limiting methods of protest. This is the first attempt so far to define the limits to which student protest should be taken; it is remarkable because to some extent it flies in the face of trade union opposition to legally binding contracts.

The National Union of Students clearly intends that contracts will be subject to negotiation between individual student unions and the institutions to which they belong, but the report lays down several guidelines. For example, it recommends that "college regulations should prescribe the following offences, and no others: (i) to engage in conduct which actively disrupts the teaching or study or research of the college; (ii) to damage or deface any property of the college". In return, the student would be guaranteed academic freedom, defined as "(i) the right to study and to have access to facilities for study; (ii) the right of freedom of thought and interpretation; (iii) the right of those who teach within or service an institution to withdraw their labour for industrial reasons". In particular, disciplinary proceedings should never be taken in the event of a boycott of classes or an occupation provided that these actions do not involve any conflict with the rights of others to study.

Although there may not seem anything particularly novel about these recommendations, if the report is adopted by the NUS conference next month, it would mean that protests such as that at the London School of Economics, where gates were removed and college property damaged, and at Warwick, where occupation of the administration block infringed the rights of others to study, would be forbidden. On the other hand, the report suggests that disputes arising in colleges are often a product of bad government, and there is a strong hint that such disputes can be prevented only by changing college government to incorporate representatives of all members of the academic community. The report also comes out strongly against bringing police on to college campuses to settle disputes.

Another recommendation in the report is the setting up of a higher education advisory board. This body is envisaged as a watchdog to safeguard academic freedom, and also as a final appeals body which would hear appeals against a college decision to expel a student or to refuse admission on academic grounds.

The report also protests against confidential files. In particular, it points out that no information about the political activities of a student should be gathered or recorded. Some aspects of this part of the report may be difficult for student activists to swallow, especially its suggestion that students should have access to those parts of their own records which are not confidential. At Warwick, and at many other universities which were engulfed last year by the wave of protest about students' files, however, the students maintained that no information should be filed which they are unable to inspect.