

IN BRIEF

More trouble for dissidents

Seven Moscow Jewish activists, all members of the Voronel/Azbel' seminar and/or the Helsinki monitoring group, have had their homes searched unusually thoroughly by the police. The seven are the cyberneticist Aleksandr Lerner, Josif Beilin, a mathematician, Ida Nudel, an economist, and the engineers Vladimir Slepak, Anatolii Shcharanskii, Boris Chernobil'skii and Mikhail Kremen. An open letter in *Izvestiya* signed by Dr Senya Lipavskii, a former associate of these groups, accuses them of being financed by CIA funds. Lipavskii also claimed that during their protest hunger strike of March 1974, the sinologist Vitalii Rubin and the chemist David Azbel' did, in fact, eat regular meals. (Both Rubin and David Azbel' have since emigrated, Azbel' in 1974 and Rubin in 1976).

Dissident circles in Moscow associate

the new repressions with a recent article in *Pravda* urging political vigilance "as never before". In Warsaw, meanwhile, the latest batch of arrests of members of the Workers' Defence Committee has included the mathematician Jan Lytinski and Mieczyslaw Grudzinski, a computer engineer.

Argentina-Peru deal

Argentina's growing role in Latin America's development of nuclear power was given another boost at the end of last week when she signed an agreement with Peru to build a 10 MW research reactor there. The agreement, reportedly involving a \$50 million budget, covers design, equipment and training of local scientists. Argentina herself has a 300 MW reactor in operation, and a 600 MW reactor under construction. Recently she announced her

support for Brazil's efforts to maintain the controversial deal with West Germany, the original source of guidance for her own programme.

BNFL: another step

Plans submitted to Cumbria County Council by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL) for expansion of existing Magnox reprocessing facilities and for facilities to develop its Harvest waste solidification process were, as expected, quickly accepted by the council's planning committee last week.

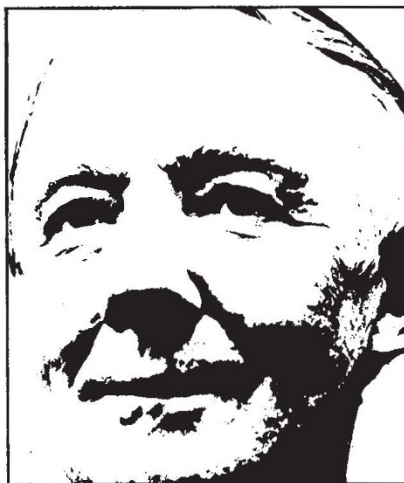
BNFL split into two its more controversial oxide fuel reprocessing plans. The part covering construction of the plant is now expected to be called in for a public inquiry. The other part, relating to the provision of storage facilities for incoming fuel, will, BNFL says, not prejudice any decision on the plant itself.

SCIENCE is being taught today in British universities, polytechnics and colleges in many different ways. We still have special honours degrees, where one subject is dealt with 'in depth', with the intention of producing specialists. It is generally agreed that brilliant students, particularly if they intend to follow a career in their speciality, may thus be well served. However, some departments now offer such a variety of optional courses that the result may be unrecognisable to the traditionally minded. Zoologists may never study a whole animal, botanists may know little about common plants. Even when such fashionable absurdities are avoided, many would agree that less gifted students, only able to scrape a pass, are better served by more broadly based instruction.

The 'interdisciplinary degree', however, is not new. Fifty years ago Part One of the Cambridge Natural Science Tripos (taken in three subjects), or the similar London University General Honours course were familiar examples; both entitled their holders to an honours BA or BSc. The degrees were considered suitable for the less able, or as a preliminary to specialisation in a single subject.

Today, there is a much wider choice. Modular degree courses may allow students to choose combinations of subject which appear illogical to conservative academics. Even when, as is true of most colleges, students are sensibly counselled, so that the subjects studied are reasonably compatible, those entering these courses

may have somewhat doubtful job-prospects, particularly serious at a time of graduate unemployment. It would be little consolation for a prospective chemist to be told that he is now better suited to enter "the

Grade expectations

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upper reaches of the Civil Service, banks, the highest positions in industry" because he is now better educated than his contemporaries studying classics (if his course fits the criteria suggested by Sir Hermann Bondi, *Nature* 27 January 1977) when the Royal Institute of Chemistry finds itself unable to recognise his qualifications.

This was why the Council for Science and Technology Institutes,

which coordinates the work of the recognised bodies in Britain, held a meeting in London recently to discuss how multidisciplinary degrees could qualify their holders for admission. It was clear that all the institutes were anxious to find ways to allow these graduates to qualify, provided this did not lower their standards. Most give credit for those parts of the course which are relevant, and suggest how essential gaps may be filled. As all the institutes only elect graduates after several years of experience in their subject, the length and nature of this experience can be adjusted to overcome deficiencies. It is clearly important that all teaching departments should know, in advance, how new courses are likely to be viewed by the professional institutes, as well as by prospective employers.

Membership of professional institutes may become increasingly important, as these qualifications become the means by which scientists are recognised within the Common Market. It is also clear that the greater difficulty a candidate may have in being accepted the more valuable membership will be to him. The institutes must be fair and sympathetic in all cases, but must also be seen to be maintaining their standards. They must always remember Groucho Marx, whose applications to join an exclusive club were repeatedly black-balled. Eventually he was informed that he had been successful, upon which he asked "Who would want to join a club which admitted a bum like me?"