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British universities on the brink

The threat of execution is said to help to clarify the mind. The British university system, which has woken up to the threat of trouble ahead only within the past year, will not even profit by knowing where it stands from the announcement last week of the allocations of funds to individual universities for the three years ahead (see page 99). The dilemma is constitutionally appropriate. The University Grants Committee has dealt with the universities as it should — self-governing institutions as they like to think they are, they have been told to manage their own affairs as best they can within the funds made available for the next few years. But some options the universities are individually and collectively denied. Because the grants committee has coupled its financial allocations with specific instructions about the numbers of domestic and European Community students individual universities may in future accommodate, it will not be possible for them to work their way out of trouble by being more productive. (If ever the universities have time, the legality of this requirement might usefully be tested in the courts.) And because the universities that have come well out of the past week's lottery are unlikely, self-governing as they are, to throw in their lot with the less fortunate, it is probable that half a dozen of the places most seriously affected will have to sink or swim on their own. Some of them, faced with budget cuts of 25 per cent or so (Aston in Birmingham and Salford for example) will be lucky if they do not sink, and will even now be asking whether that is the surreptitious intention of either the government or the grants committee.

For while the committee's announcement last week will certainly leave its mark on the British university system, there are still too many loose ends for comfort. What will in the end most affect the universities whose budgets are most drastically to be cut will be the lack of any formal mechanism for paying off redundant members of university staffs. Although it is agreed that the universities on which the cuts fall hardest will be able to adjust only by getting rid of tenured academics, no funds are available for providing them with compensation. And although Dr Edward Parkes, the chairman of the University Grants Committee, told a House of Commons select committee last year that some £200 million would be needed to bring about the impending adjustment, merely £20 million has been set aside for such purposes (out of the universities' collective subvention). But should not academics suffer the indignities and impoverishments that seem certain to afflict some three million other unemployed people in the United Kingdom before the year is out? This is what the enemies of the universities are asking. Some such calculation may account for the spleen with which the government has pursued the universities since its election more than two years ago. The trouble is that tenured academics most probably have rights at common law against universities that dismiss them, and that the amounts involved will far exceed the sum that Dr Parkes has put aside. In the end, either the universities concerned will have to exercise the right of self-governing institutions to go bankrupt or they will have to be rescued with more public money than the government will save with the cuts now decreed.

Another conspicuous loose end is that the grants committee has delivered its advice ("instructions" is more appropriate) without saying how its decisions have been reached. Are the lucky universities those with the lowest unit costs, the best track records in research grant applications, the lowest staff-student ratios, the best records in the recruitment of students, or what? There are reasons why too detailed a disclosure of the criteria that have been used would be damaging to individual universities. As things are,

however, the committee should forgive those now unwillingly dependent on its allocations of funds for suspecting that often mere gossip or even prejudice has determined its decisions. This charge, no doubt a slur, is nevertheless inescapable. If it had been prudent, or even merely politically expedient, the committee would several months ago have invited universities to agree on the criteria by which its decisions should be made. Even if the universities had failed to agree among themselves, the result would have been a licence to do what has now been done. As things are, without having consulted in advance, Dr Parkes has put his committee in the unenviable position of being regarded by the universities — his strongest supporters — as a dispensable bulwark between themselves and the public purse.

Four other questions remain unanswered. First, is it right that decisions of such gravity for the universities should be made in the absence of a mechanism for settling policy on higher education as a whole (polytechnics included)? Second, should British taxpayers be expected to put up with apparently arbitrary limits on the provision of university education, regardless of the ability and the willingness of qualified institutions to provide it? Third, what will be the consequences of last week's decisions for the pattern and even the quality of research? Finally, is it now to be supposed that higher education has become, as educationists have become too fond of saying, "irrelevant"? These questions will be much discussed in the months ahead.

Promising Americans

The United States Administration will not lightly be forgiven for the hash it has made of plans for international collaboration in this year's budget. President Ronald Reagan's budget director, Mr David Stockman, seems just the kind of man to implement a promise "to get the government off the people's backs". It is also a technical triumph that he and his colleagues were able to produce a coherent replacement for President Carter's budget during their few weeks in limbo, between the election last November and Inauguration Day. But in the process the budget team was plainly unreasonably dismissive of the consequences overseas of its proposals. And while Congress is doing what it can to repair some of the damage, at this stage it cannot put everything to rights. Certainly Congress will not be able to exorcise the impression that overseas obligations take second place, in the evolution of United States strategy, to domestic exigencies.

The trouble is well illustrated by two very different examples from the budget for the next financial year (which begins on 1 October). First, and simplest, is the case of the overseas budget of the National Science Foundation, used largely for supporting a surprisingly modest programme of direct collaboration overseas. (That large funds are still to be spent by other agencies, the State Department for example, is beside the point.) Like the foundation's educational budget, the overseas programme was drastically curtailed in Mr Stockman's budget. Nobody seems to have appreciated that the National Academy of Sciences was counting on this part of the foundation's budget for its contribution to the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis, of which it is (with the Soviet Union) the principal member, and from which it is required by its obligations to give a year's notice of resignation. It now seems likely that the House of Representatives has found a way of letting the foundation dispose more flexibly of its budget, so that the academy will not have to