Polish Academy of Sciences

Foreign travel rights restricted

Scholars employed by the Polish Academy of Sciences who wish to travel abroad will from now on need the approval of "the appropriate party secretary". According to a recent circular from Dr Zdzisław Kaczmarek, academic secretary of the academy, this change is designed to prevent the issue of passports to "persons whose socio-political activities and attitudes" are "negative" or "openly aimed against the constitutional, and legal order obtaining in the Polish People's Republic".

The circular forms part of the instructions concerning the process of political "verification", now being implemented in two stages within the academy. The restriction on travel has ostensibly been imposed in order to safeguard the prestige of Polish science abroad and to improve the international image of Poland. It is, however, a marked reversal of recent academy policy on foreign travel. Two years ago, after the signing of the Gdansk accord which inaugurated Solidarity and a nationwide wave of liberalization, the academy demanded that it alone should be the arbiter of whether or not its members and employees should travel abroad. Such a clause, it was hoped, would be written into the promised new legislation on the Academy of Sciences; but martial law was imposed last December a few days before the session of the academy that would have debated this and other liberal clauses including proposals to change the role of the academic secretary. Indeed, Dr Kaczmarek's instructions on verification are an ironic reminder of what that session had hoped to achieve. For the academic secretary, whose post is of ministerial rank under the present structure of the academy, is responsible, in the first instance, not to the academy members or council but to the prime minister.

The new restrictions on foreign travel — and indeed the whole verification process — could affect members and employees of the academy deeply. In Poland, the Academy of Sciences is organized completely separately from the universities (unlike, for example, the Soviet Union, where academicians also hold university lectureships) and since the university purges of 1968, the academy has been a haven for scholars whose political views were considered too suspect for them to be entrusted with the teaching of young people. Indeed, the leading dissident group of the late 1970s, the "Committee for Social Self-Defence" (KOR) included among its 33 members two Academicians (Drs Edward Lipinski and Jan Kielanowski), while several others were employed in various academy institutes.

Objections to the new clampdown on travel could, however, in the current

draconian climate, well be taken as further proof of dissent. A recent attack in the party media alleged that cultural and scientific contacts between Poland and the West had been exploited by Western intelligence agencies. At the end of the 1970s, it is claimed, foreign scholarships were given to persons selected as future opposition leaders, while agents were sent to Poland disguised as "scholarship holders, lecturers, correspondents and experts".

Vera Rich

UK universities

Modest hiring prospect cheers

British universities seem this week to have been enormously cheered by the prospect of recruiting some hundreds of younger scientists and engineers to academic posts. The only fly in the ointment is that this prospect is made possible only by the £6 million removed by the Secretary of State for Science and Education, Sir Keith Joseph, from the estimated budget of the Social Science Research Council over the next three years. One research council official confessed earlier this week that the "new blood" money seemed a little like "blood money".

As yet, it seems not to have been decided how much of the £6 million will be available in the coming financial year, a decision that Sir Keith has left to the Social Science Research Council. Nor has it been decided how the funds thus liberated will be shared among the other four research councils, although the Science and Engineering Research Council, the largest and with a direct responsibility for university research, seems certain to get the largest share. The chances are that the funds available will be shared out among disciplines, and that departments will be allowed to compete for the posts available by telling hard-luck stories to the councils.

While the numerical effect of the £6 million that will be available over the next three years remains to be determined, the research councils are already congratulating themselves on having been able to counteract some of the damage done to university research by the financial pressures on university budgets.

Thus the Science and Engineering Research Council has supported at least 23 applications under its Special Replacement Scheme, under which it will pay the salary of a senior researcher for up to five years provided that the university will undertake to appoint a younger researcher to a permanent academic post immediately. Applications under this scheme appear, however, to have tailed off in the past

several months, apparently because of the counter-attractions of the government-backed early retirement scheme.

So far, there appear also to have been few takers for the scheme under which the council will pay the salaries of researchers left stranded by the reorganization of universities involving the closure of departments. Two such awards have so far been made, both of them to casualties of the decision of a year ago that the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Bradford should be "phased out".

Dr Michael Lord, a biochemist concerned with cell organelles, has joined the chloroplast group at the University of Warwick (now renamed plant biochemistry). The council will pay Dr Lord's salary for the next ten years, while the four members of his group transferred from Bradford will continue to be supported from research council funds. Similarly, Professor M.J. Merrett has moved to the University of Wales at Swansea with the help of a research council subvention to the university. ●

Cancer research

French change

Jack Ralite, French minister of health and one of the few communist ministers in the Mitterrand government, is contemplating a major reorganization of cancer research and the care of cancer patients, to judge by his moves earlier this month.

First, he has dissolved the "high committee" on cancer, which was only a little over two years old, essentially because it had failed in its task of uniting the two major French cancer charities, the Ligue Nationale Française contre le Cancer and the Association pour le Développement de la Recherche sur la Cancer à Villejuif (ADRCV). These charities control budgets amounting to more than FF 122 million (£10 million), considerably more than government expenditure on cancer research. But because of personality conflicts, the two have never been able to develop complementary research policies. The "high committee", now abandoned, was the previous government's attempt to knock their heads together.

The Ligue and ADRCV may now have only a temporary respite, however. For the minister has also launched a great national enquiry on cancer (the Concertation Nationale sur le Cancer) which is designed to provide the basis for a new politics of cancer.

Through the enquiry, which is addressed to all concerned, the minister will no doubt learn how French cancer research and care is riven by factionalism and the philosophy of the *savant*. He may also be expecting to confirm some other more debatable ideas about research, which come through clearly in the questionnaire which is the basis of the Concertation Nationale.

The questionnaire proposes that of the three principal sectors of researchers in cancer — biologists, clinicians and epidemiologists — the biologists are "very preponderant". Is it not important today, asks the questionnaire, to reflect on the evolution of this state of affairs "and on the consequences of this primacy given to reductionist approaches?" Biologists tend naturally to choose areas of research as close as possible to fundamental biology, says the questionnaire. "Is this not to the detriment of specific research on cancer?" And, the questionnaire asks, should there not be separate rules for making evaluations of cancer research, so it is not subject to the more fundamental criteria applied by the medical research council (INSERM) and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique?

Such questions have been asked before, notably in the United States, but they are still appropriate and they are expected to produce some vigorous replies in France, with sectional interests being defended in every direction. Once the fur is flying, and the political positions of every sector are evident to all, M. Ralite will make "coherent recommendations". This is democracy.

Robert Walgate

Nuclear war games

No survivors?

Moscow radio last week broadcast a virulent attack on Dr Edward Teller, the American physicist, for having published in *Readers' Digest* an article which suggested that nuclear war would not obliterate all life on this planet.

The broadcast, scripted by the official news agency TASS, alleged that Dr Teller has a vested interest in the arms race, since its "reversal" would deprive him of his "cushy job" as a presidential aide. Teller's article, TASS alleged, was intended to "dampen the truly immense public interest all over the world" in the Soviet peace proposals tabled at the the United Nations.

The Soviet proposal for a total test-ban treaty to create a more favourable atmosphere for arms limitation negotiations ran into considerable opposition from the United States, which maintains that the problems of verifying compliance with any such agreement should be solved before negotiations are started. In fact the Soviet Union put forward a package of verification proposals, including the international exchange of seismic data and the right of signatories to any such treaty to demand an on-site inspection of any suspected explosion in the territory of a fellow signatory. Since the Soviet proposals were backed up by carefully orchestrated panegyrics in the Soviet press the TASS writers may have genuinely assumed that the US rejection of these initiatives has a similar media back-up. Teller's role as "father of the hydrogen bomb" is stressed and the activities of the

Pugwash movement ignored. His attempts to refute some of the more fantastic myths of what nuclear war would entail, his quoting of instances from Hiroshima and Nagasaki ("bridges were open to traffic a day after the blast, trains ran on the second day and streetcars were operating on the third"), and his suggestions on how to remove radioactive contamination are construed, by TASS, as "cynicism and misanthropy".

In fact, Teller's thesis that there would be a significant number of survivors of a war involving nuclear weapons and other "means of mass destruction" has tacitly been accepted by Soviet civil defence

Asbestos hazard

Bankruptcy protects the rich

Washington

The question of liability for the long-term latent occupational diseases of workers has been further muddled by the gigantic Manville Corporation, a mining and manufacturing company that is a pillar of US industry, which has filed for bankruptcy to protect itself from claims from asbestos workers, which the company says, could total as much as \$2,000 million.

The company's action in August threw into turmoil the question of how US corporations deal with occupational health problems, sending other asbestos companies to their lawyers for advice and making claimants and their advocates suspect a fraud. It will be months before the full implications for the declining US asbestos industry, and for other industries with similar problems, are known.

Manville's action was an extraordinary use of the US bankruptcy courts; companies normally file for bankruptcy when their debts have become intolerable in order to prevent outright liquidation. In those circumstances, the court takes charge of settling a corporation's debts, freezing creditors' claims and other lawsuits and dividends paid to shareholders, while a reorganization plan is being agreed.

But Manville is a relatively healthy corporation, although it reported a loss for the first half of 1982 of \$32 million. Its executives believe that the effect of filing for bankruptcy will be, ironically, to make the company still healthier.

Manville, which is the largest US producer of asbestos products used in building, insulation, brake lining, shipbuilding and underground pipes, has 16,500 claims outstanding against it. Its decision to file for bankruptcy was prompted by a study indicating that another 32,000 claims might yet be made, with an average settlement cost of \$40,000.

The asbestos industry in general faces a tidal wave of claims, because there are an estimated nine million people in the United States who have worked in an asbestos-related industry and who might claim damages on account of the risk of develop-

planners. Recent reports of civil defence exercises, including practice evacuation of schools and hospitals, speak of the need for further training in the use of "means of protection against weapons of mass destruction". A broadcast on Vilnius radio last summer by a civil defence official went into considerable details of the various gamma and neutron radiation monitors available to establish contamination of the population and of livestock, machines and equipment — suggesting precisely the same swift return to quasi-normality after nuclear bombardment for which Teller was castigated by TASS.

Vera Rich

ing mesothelioma or asbestosis, maybe many years later.

The law so far has not ruled in favour of the asbestos industry. A lawsuit decided by the Supreme Court of the state of New Jersey last month ruled out as a possible defence a company's ignorance of possible adverse health effects at the time its workers were exposed to asbestos. Awareness of the health hazards of asbestos has been relatively recent. Manville itself (then known as the Johns-Manville Corporation) lost a case in a California court and was forced to pay damages of \$28,000 to a victim over and above the workman's compensation.

The Manville Corporation has also disputed for seven years with its insurance agents the point at which their liability should begin: at the time when the workers were exposed, when the disease appeared or from the time when medical hazards existed. As a result of the filing for bankruptcy, claimants will be able to obtain from the corporation data about what it knew and when. One court has already concluded that Manville concealed knowledge of asbestos hazards. Nevertheless, the corporation has spent \$24.5 million lawyers' fees alone, and has so far paid out \$24 million in damages.

"CONGRATULATIONS! YOU ARE NOW FINANCIALLY AS WELL AS MORALLY BANKRUPT."

By filing for bankruptcy, the corporation can put off paying existing creditors until the courts decide what should be done. In the meantime, no new claims can be filed. In reorganizing itself,