

conspicuous at both places.

The explanation is straightforward. Both universities select students by means of an entrance examination of their own, originally the device by means of which scholarships were awarded. In the past few decades, private secondary schools have tumbled to it that their leaving students will have a better chance of getting to Oxbridge if they stay on for a few months after their normal school course, and the artful middle classes, always quick to make the most of whatever social services are available, have readily concluded that the competition is well worthwhile. But the publicly supported secondary schools are less well-equipped to provide this service for those among their students who might wish to go to Oxbridge, while many students who might nurse such ambitions are deterred by the reputation of both places for elitism of several kinds. As a consequence, neither university can claim that it recruits just those students who would most benefit from its distinctive way of teaching students. It is understandable that reflective Oxbridge academics should have sensed that unless they changed their ways, a future government might do it for them.

The reforms on which Oxbridge has so far embarked are unfortunately merely cosmetic. It is now several years since Oxford abandoned the requirement that entering students should know some Latin, and then the requirement that they should at least know something of a modern language was dropped in deference to the poverty of language teaching in publicly supported secondary schools. Now the general paper in the Oxford entrance examination, in many ways the most challenging (and entertaining) instrument of its kind, is also to be dropped. Meanwhile, the university (to its credit) has for several years been seeking out potential students from maintained secondary schools, offering them places on the basis of their performance in a future school-leaving examination.

The defects of all these devices are that they throw together into the same pot students who differ markedly in their academic preparation. As yet, Oxford has made no concessions to this circumstance by softening the curriculum most of its students follow. At Cambridge, where students can if they wish (and try hard) follow less specialized courses of study, attempts are similarly being made to cast the net wider, while a majority of the colleges awarding scholarships (whose nominal value is now negligible) seems ready to give up the practice in the hope that people will then set less store by success. In the same spirit might the organizer of a prizefight decide not to award a purse for fear that the participants might fight too hard, and damage each other.

Oxbridge cannot hope to escape political pressure as easily. The urgent need is that its selection procedures should be seen to be equitable. At present they are not, principally because selection depends to some extent on the quality (and quantity) of preparation by secondary schools and because it is recognized that secondary schools vary enormously in their academic capability. Some schools are frankly bad: why should their unlucky students be further penalized by being for practical purposes denied an Oxbridge place? As it happens, in the British system even the good schools are also educationally bad — indeed, they are often those that set the pace in that systematic perversion of general education that requires that students should rehearse at school what they intend to study at university or elsewhere in higher education. The result is that even Oxbridge is denied liberally educated students, while its selection procedures further accentuate the lopsidedness of the school curriculum.

The only way out of the dilemma is to change the system. So long as the school curriculum is as specialized as it is at present, and until Oxbridge decides to select students by lot, it will remain vulnerable to the charge that its students are predominantly those whose parents could afford to send them to a good secondary school. But the Oxbridge influence is powerful enough — that is part of the complaint — for them to be able to pave the way towards constructive reform. And the way is clear. Potential students should be selected a year earlier, and on the basis of general and not specialized attainment, and should then embark

on a longer university course, not the three-year scamper through higher learning which occupies no more than 72 weeks of a student's time. Such a procedure would allow a new student a chance to decide what kind of specialist he or she will be. It would also be a valuable demonstration to the rest of the British educational system that it is possible (as most other countries show) to arrange that arts and humanities students know what science is about and that even technical people can string together sentences in some language other than their own, or even write a literate scientific paper. □

Mr Reagan's dog-days

Is the United States presidency just unlucky, or is it accident-prone for some deeper reason?

PRESIDENT Reagan has had a bad beginning to 1983. The new Congress, with its preponderance of Democrats in the House of Representatives, is not of his choosing but might have been less unwelcome if his first eighteen months had been more obviously successful. But what has gone wrong this year cannot be blamed on the elected representatives but on the President and his entourage. Troubles such as those at the Environmental Protection Agency (for this week's instalment, see page 279) and, more seriously, at the Arms Control Agency, are the consequences of mistakes that should not have happened. Mrs Anne Burford would not have been forced out disowned if the government had had a policy on the environment. The danger that the Senate will not agree to appoint the President's nominated successor to Mr Eugene Rostow would not have arisen if Mr Rostow had not been fired precipitately and unnecessarily. The consequence is that the Administration is having to cobble together on the backs of envelopes policies in both important fields which are likely, for the sake of political palatability, to make more concessions to Congress than the government will be able to live with comfortably. The fable of the dog crossing the stream with a bone in its mouth refers.

In such circumstances, it is natural that sceptics should ask what will next go wrong. This year's science budget is one obvious worry. Superficially, the research agencies have done well, the National Science Foundation perhaps the most conspicuous among them. Part of the explanation is that the Administration's delight at the recruitment of Dr Edward Knapp as the foundation's new director led it, last November, to change its tack on federal support for science education. Two years after deciding that federal support for science education must vanish, the Administration wrote in something in its 1984 budget for this forgotten cause — and then found Congress even more anxious to up the ante. But since neither partner in this complicated Dutch auction yet knows how it would spend \$1 million, let alone fifty or a thousand times as much (the White House and Congress respectively) the prospect is either that the money will not be spent or the cause on which it has been lavished will be discredited.

These are the errors of commission. More worrying are the fields in which much has been promised but nothing has been done. It is, for example, just a year since the President's Science Advisor Dr George Keyworth announced the formation of a council of distinguished scientists to provide the government with advice on scientific questions. Dr Keyworth was careful to emphasize that his new committee was not a re-creation of that venerable (and liberal) talking-shop, the President's Scientific Advisory Committee, but a kind of task-force of hard-working people who would get things done. Its first assignment was to study the problem of the national laboratories — are there too many, do they cost too much and what, in any case, are they for? Although people were plainly hoping for answers within the year, a new budget has come and gone with hardly anything having been said about this gigantic problem. Here again, it seems, the administration has built a machine to serve its purposes but has forgotten to turn the handle. No wonder that people suspect it does not know what to do about science education, and that all those who depend on its success at making its decisions stick are nervous. □