

British election campaign

Education a contentious issue

SWEEPING changes in the administration of British higher education have been promised by two of the three main political parties fighting the general election on 9 June. Both the Labour Party and the Alliance of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Liberal Party advocate increased access to higher education. The Conservative Party manifesto was not due to be published until Wednesday of this week, but must be supposed to be at least defensive of the government's policy in the past four years.

The Alliance manifesto promises to increase access to higher and further education and to establish a new Ministry of Education and Training that would combine the functions of the Manpower Services Commission and the education departments. The Alliance also promises to review courses to ensure that industry is provided with suitably qualified people even if students have to take a wider range of courses before moving on to a job or more specialist education.

SDP's policy document on education and training expands on the theme, suggesting a shift from single-subject degrees to broadly-based two-year general degrees in which all undergraduates would study both arts and science subjects. This would be followed either by a two-year vocational qualification with "on the job" training or by a further academic qualification.



SDP's document (with which the Liberals will largely agree) also questions whether it is necessary to sustain the dividing line between universities and polytechnics and whether a new body should succeed the University Grants Committee (UGC) and the National Advisory Board (NAB) to distribute funds.

On science and technology, SDP wants funds to be more selectively applied and concentrated more heavily on strategic and applied research; this, it says, will require an explicit national science policy. Generous incentives should be given to companies commissioning research and development from such institutions. The Alliance manifesto promises increased government assistance to private industry, to encourage modernization and to stimulate innovation, with a corresponding reduction in defence research and development.

The Labour Party manifesto calls for "expansion with change" in post-18 education. It promises to give priority to adults denied educational opportunity, and to increase the supply of qualified engineers and technicians.

Labour's discussion document, "Education with Change", calls for a new general principle: that "all full time and part time post-school education should be available to all those who wish to take up approved courses designed to meet their needs, regardless of age". The party favours the abolition of fees for most students. Entry into higher education would be by a modular credit system that would give qualifications and learning experience appropriate recognition. UGC would be replaced by a new, more open body, the document says. This would be a

two-tier system with representatives from unions, local authorities and the Department of Education and Science on the one hand and from the universities on the other. The party intends eventually to end the distinction between universities and polytechnics.

On university research, the party endorses the present dual system of support, but says adequate levels of support need to be restored. It wants frequent reviews to ensure a proper balance between applied and fundamental research and a peer review system to monitor research output.

Labour has not produced a detailed science and technology document, but its study group's interim report says that Labour will reduce the proportion of gross domestic product spent on defence-related research. In order to help industry, Labour says it will form a new National Investment Bank to channel funds from financial institutions into long-term investments in new technology. **Tim Beardsley**

UK higher education

Royal Society warning on cuts

THE Royal Society has fired an effective shot in the battle about British higher education, with a calculation, published last week, of the extent to which social mobility will affect the demand for higher education in the two decades ahead. Although the falling number of 18-year-olds throughout the 1980s expected on demographic grounds has been used partly to justify reduced provision of higher education, the Royal Society concludes that the number of would-be students will be constant. And although the size of the 18-year-old age group will fall by 27 per cent between 1989 and 1995, the demand for higher education is likely to decrease by between 17.5 and 19 per cent.

The calculation has been produced by the Royal Society's "committee on university funding", but is largely the work of Dr P.M.D. Collins of the society's staff. The document now published says that attempts to predict future demand for higher education from gross birthrate trends are "seriously misleading", and that the planned sharp contraction of provision for higher education could deny educational opportunity to those qualified to benefit.

Two factors underlie the calculation — the proportionately greater demand for higher education among the children of the higher social classes and the slow but apparent upward social mobility of the British population. Using the pre-1981 definitions of social class, the proportion of the children whose parents are in social classes I and II (professional and managerial respectively) applying for higher education places increased from 60 per cent in 1977 to 64.6 per cent in 1981. Estimates of social mobility have been constructed from a Labour Force Survey carried out in 1981 which provided data about

the distribution of the 15-year-old population among households of different social class. On this basis, the calculation infers that the proportions of 18-year-olds in social classes I and II are increased by 1.5 per cent and 9.0 per cent by recruitment from other social classes.

Assuming no change in the proportion of 18-year-olds applying for places in higher education, the Royal Society estimates that the annual demand for student places will fluctuate narrowly about 155,000 until 1989, will decline sharply by about 30,000 between then and 1995 but will thereafter increase sharply again as the effects of the increased birthrate in the past few years become apparent. □

Credit where it's due

"... We launched Information Technology. Now we are trying to help the manufacturers of new chemical products. In Britain we are particularly good with pharmaceuticals. Cloning was a British discovery — we got a Nobel Prize for it — César Milstein down at the Molecular Biology lab in Cambridge..."

So said Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, on her government's sponsorship of industrial innovation, in an interview published in *The Observer* on 8 May. In fact S. Cohen (Stanford University) and H. Boyer (University of California at San Francisco), the holders of the basic (but disputed) cloning patent have not yet been summoned to Stockholm. And Dr Milstein, an Argentinian by origin now at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology at Cambridge, has not yet been awarded a Nobel Prize for his work on monoclonal antibodies. □