

West German universities

Minister responds to Knopp

LAST week, West German Minister of Education, Dr Dorothee Wilms, announced her intention to recast the federal university law in line with the recent Knopp report (see *nature* 26 January, p.305). The existing law, the 1976 *Hochschulrahmengesetz* which was designed to provide a unifying framework within which the *Länder* could develop their own legislation, was brought in by a social democratic (SDP) government. Now in opposition, SDP finds the commission asked the wrong questions and came up with the wrong answers. "Partly useless, partly unnecessary, and partly reactionary", commented Eckart Kuhlwein, SDP spokesman.

On the other hand, the West German Rectors' Conference (WDRK), representing the heads of universities, agrees with the report that modest change is needed to create more flexibility within which the *Länder* can act, especially in the areas of personnel, career grades and financing from sources outside the universities.

Controversy still centres on the power of the professors — of feudal proportions before the 1976 law. The report suggests strengthening faculty representation and ensuring professorial majorities in decision-making processes. Both the government and WDRK favour this change. The vice-president of the Free Uni-

versity of Berlin, however, has pointed out that this is tantamount to a return to hierarchy and less equality, towards scientific freedom away from communal control in the coordination of teaching and research. He points out that the universities could not have met the challenge of increasing student numbers without the middle grades of academic staff, which the report suggests should in future assume a still lower position relative to the professors.

A recent conference at the Berlin Aspen Institute pinpointed the failure of West Germany's universities to produce the quantity and quality of trained people the country needs. Large numbers of students, straitened finances, long periods of study, and centralized administrations have created a system in which it is often impossible for the gifted student to distinguish himself. Employment bottlenecks on the academic ladder make it difficult to maintain the pool of academic talent. One highly controversial remedy was presented by the Free Democratic leader and Foreign Secretary Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who restated his party's support for private universities and institutes. A positive comment on the private university at Wittne/Herdecke suggests that the Christian Democratic administration warms to this idea. Others point out that private can mean second-rate.

Policy formation for West German higher education is inscrutable to the point of opacity, emerging from a fog of relationships between the *Länder* and federal institutions and a series of quasi-official advisory bodies, including WDRK, the Wissenschaftsrat, the Conference of Ministers of Culture and the Federal-Land Commission for Educational Planning. These bodies are criticized for being outside parliamentary control, for their obscure nomination procedures, for overworking senior personnel, for consensus policies, and for a general lack of democratic legitimacy and openness.

This system will produce the new *Hochschulrahmengesetz*, which must also be seen as one facet of the administration's overall drive for industrial growth based on science and technology. **Sarah Tooze**

Italy's biotechnology

FAST action

Milan

ALTHOUGH basic biotechnological research is good in Italy, the same cannot be said of its application in industry. Thus concludes a report on Italian biotechnology published by the Federation of Scientific and Technical Associations (FAST), which calls for the establishment of a study committee to decide on some priority applications.

That call was endorsed by Luigi Granelli, Minister of Research, in welcoming the report. At last, he said, Italy has an exhaustive survey of the state of the art of biotechnology in the 150 Italian institutes where relevant research is carried out. The FAST report, added Granelli, is a realistic guide to combining public and industrial efforts in biotechnology, particularly at a time when Trieste is likely to be chosen as one of the two sites of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization's International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (see *Nature* 16 February, p.583).

The report was edited by Professor Gabriele Milanese of the Biochemical Genetics Institute in Pavia. The message of the survey is that basic research in biology in Italy compares well with other European countries, thanks to recent university law and to the projects supported by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Italy's principal research council, in continuance of the policy implemented since the 1950s by the late Professor Adriano Buzzati-Traverso. By contrast, industrial applications are poor despite the involvement of three public companies (Farmitalia-Carlo Erba of the Montedison group, Assoreni and Sclavo of the Eni group) and five private companies (Sorin Biomedica of the Fiat group, Lepetit, Recordati, Soreno Institute and Societa Produzione Antibiotici) and despite the fact that industry cooperates with public centres by investing in basic research. **Paola De Paoli**

China

Storm over beancurds

AN attempt by the director of a Chinese research institute to add "technological pilferage" to the list of ideological shortcomings against which there is a current drive in the country has backfired. As a result, Ge Fengheng, director of the Liaoning Provincial Commercial Science Research Institute, has found himself the object of a campaign against "local monarchs in science" that may be widely applied.

The incident, known as the "beancurd storm", began last October when an engineer from the Liaoning Institute, Wu Wentao, read to a meeting on food additives a report about a new variety of "liquid beancurd" he had developed. This evoked widespread interest, since beancurd, a staple protein source, is in short supply in many places in China, and the new product could do much to fill the gap. A special meeting of the institute's academic council was accordingly convened, at which director Ge congratulated Wu and immediately accused him of "pilferage". According to Ge, Wu had presented his work without asking the institute or reporting to it afterwards, worked on a project not assigned by the institute, included foreign data in his report, and placed special emphasis on his use of additives to distinguish between his beancurd and other types already in pro-

duction.

The Liaoning Commercial Department ordered an investigation, and on 7 December reported that the production of such beancurd was unnecessary. By this time the distinguished journal *Shipin Gexue* (Food Science) had published Wu's preliminary research report. This apparently brought the matter to the attention of the party newspaper, the *People's Daily*, which discovered that during the past few years, Ge had repeatedly criticized the work of the institute's researchers as "pilferage", forbidding them to discuss the line their research should take, and used his position and power to penalize those who showed signs of opposing him. As a result, *People's Daily* concluded, there had been "serious losses" to the prestige of the party and to the "party's cause of scientific research".

The "beancurd storm", says *People's Daily*, has implications far beyond Liaoning, raising the issue of the personal qualities needed in the head of a research institute. Beijing radio went even further: "local monarchs" like Ge would not have been able to function were there not also "mistakes and a bureaucratic style of work" in the bodies responsible for administering the country's science. **Vera Rich**