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The changing of the old guard

The British government seems to have sensed that its policy on education could be an electoral liability, which is correct. But throwing printed money at the problem will not help.

MR Kenneth Baker, the new Secretary of State for Education and Science in the British government, has with enthusiasm taken on an impossible task. After two years of bruising labour troubles in the schools, he has implicitly undertaken to restore the morale of the dwindling band of able teachers, to modernize the school curriculum and to produce results (better examination results). He has to do the same in higher education, somehow persuading academics and their institutions that the government's reduction of their budgets by more than 20 per cent in five years is in reality a measure of its high esteem for them. Harder still, he must persuade researchers (for the government has not taken this golden chance to split off the administration of research) that his predecessors have caused institutes to close, and cohorts of bright young people to find posts elsewhere, so that the remainder will have better pearls to look for. All this has to be done in less than eighteen months.

Mr Baker's enthusiasm is his strongest suit. It won him notable success when, as minister of information technology five years ago, he persuaded the British government and many of its electors that the time had come to "cable Britain", putting umpteen channels of cable television into every home. He had fortunately been promoted from that post by the time it became apparent that he had not persuaded that section of the community with funds sufficient to launch commercial cable that there could be no better place for their money. It would nevertheless be a great misfortune if the transformation now planned for British education follows the pattern of the cable revolution that never happened. Education is too important.

The most chilling sentence in last week's letter from the University Grants Committee to its constituents is the statement that there is now no prospect of being able to increase the proportion of university students following courses in the government's special engineering and technology programme by more than 14 per cent over 1984–85 by the end of the decade because of "early specialization and staffing" in the schools. Similar constraints apply elsewhere across the educational spectrum, and governments are not entirely to blame. British universities have been chiefly influential in requiring that school-leavers should have so thoroughly rehearsed at school what they will learn at university that students are at once bored (because they know it all already) and ill-educated (because they know nothing else). The universities have now changed their tune.

So how should Mr Baker best blend his endearing personal enthusiasm with the long-term character of the problem of education and research? Here are a few maxims he might follow. Most parts of his new intellectual empire have been through a long period of change, which has accelerated in the past few years. The schools had hardly survived the intense curriculum development of the 1960s when they were required to change again, for largely social reasons. Higher education began that period by being expected to grow quickly and was then asked to stand still until the time came to contract. The same has happened in research. People are sick and tired of it. A moratorium on organizational revolution would be a blessing.

An end to upheaval does not however require stagnation. Mr Baker would do himself and his constituents a power of good if he allowed that, within a framework of stability, it would be in the public interest if people or institutions who wish to change were allowed to do so. There would be some schools keen on taking up new bits and pieces of curriculum, even some universities anxious to break out in new directions, not to mention a small army of academic researchers who would eagerly do new things. Inspection might even discover that the Royal Greenwich Observatory, about to be moved for largely administrative reasons, might usefully be left where it is on the understanding that its professional astronomers should compete for research grants with their colleagues in the universities.

To whom should even an enthusiastic new minister turn for advice on matters like these? The trouble with the British enterprise in education and science is that its managers have been tainted by the failures of the past. All honourable men and women, they are the same who have failed to defend their institutions from internal weaknesses and from the malevolence of Mr Baker's predecessors. They have lost the allegiance of their younger and more creative colleagues. Mr Baker, if his intentions are serious, had better get out and about, off the beaten tracks of the corridors of administrative tidiness. While on his journeys, he might make the speech or two suggesting that he is someone who knows what the enterprise is for. □

What yellow peril?

The British government has said it has not found mycotoxins in samples of yellow rain.

THE notion that the people of Laos and Cambodia were attacked by their Vietnamese neighbours by means of a chemical toxin sprayed from aircraft had become a bit of a joke even before Dr Matthew Meselson turned it into pastiche by remarking that most of what appears to be yellow rain consists of the excrement of bees. The allegation was first made by Mr Alexander Haig during his brief spell as US Secretary of State, but on the flimsiest of evidence. Trichothecene toxins, produced naturally by *Fusarium* fungi, are undeniably lethal in appropriate circumstances, but less quickly so than cheaper modern chemical warfare agents.

As time has passed, the case has been less easy to sustain. People's capacity to analyse for trichothecenes is one of the marvels of mass-spectrographic assay. The fact that Britain's Porton laboratory has looked for trichothecenes in yellow rain and failed to find them does not imply that all samples of yellow rain are free from mycotoxins, or that no yellow rain has ever been so contaminated deliberately. But it does give the lie to the notion that all yellow rain is lethal, which is not surprising since most of it is known and admitted to be the excrement of bees. So now there are two choices; either the State Department must acknowledge that the Vietnamese were even more devilishly clever than had been supposed in concealing their use of an improbable chemical weapon behind the cloak of a previously ill-recognized biological phenomenon, or the State Department should allow that it may have been mistaken. □