

sure could price even the most efficient reactor designs out of the market. But Walker will also know that the fluctuating price of oil can only, in the long run, increase relative to the prices of other fuels. The need for nuclear power in Britain or anywhere is not an absolute but a matter for intricate judgement. Walker's decision will be the more convincing if he makes that plain. The Layfield report itself could turn out to be an invaluable guide to the often contradictory economics of those with opinions of the value of nuclear power — optimistic, sceptical and downright perverse.

Research

For the research community, another economic question may be even more important. Britain is not the only country whose government has decided that the technology of nuclear power is potentially too important to be left to others. Direct spending of taxpayers' money on research and development in nuclear power is probably not much short of £100 million a year, with perhaps a comparable sum creamed off electricity bills. If the decision goes against Sizewell, it will make little sense to keep up the research. But a decision to build the Sizewell plant will leave unanswered the question how research and development in this field should be financed in relation to the numbers of nuclear power stations likely to be built in the years ahead. Walker or one of his successors is going to have to tackle that question soon. It should be more easily decided now that the UK Atomic Energy Authority has been made a trading fund, required to keep books as if it were a company.

The more immediate question of safety is similarly not absolute. But the fact that there is not yet an absolutely safe nuclear reactor does not imply that reactors cannot safely be accommodated with people in the same tract of land. Both Chernobyl and, earlier, the Three Mile Island reactor accident in the United States, were illustrations of how reasonably (but not perfectly) designed machines were induced to behave badly by their operators. The Three Mile Island accident is the more worrying because the operators acted sensibly in the period leading up to the accident. The moral, for those who would build reactors, is that much more attention even than at present must be lavished on the training, discipline and performance of the operators. Those in charge must be regarded as if they were airline pilots; accidents develop more slowly in nuclear reactors than in aircraft, but their consequences are greater. If Walker wishes to convince the British public that the Sizewell station could be safely built, he could do worse than to offer what countries such as Britain need in any case (and which is partly provided in the United States by the cumbersome procedures of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission), regular and public invigilation of the management of these plants.

But what should the minister and the British government decide? The Sizewell inquiry may have dealt with the need in Britain for a nuclear power programme as such, but the immediate proposal is that there should be a single pressurized-water reactor station five years or so from now. A single plant, especially one built in the present climate, is almost certain to be put together accurately and well. CEGB says it wants to build the machine; if it can confirm, in the light of information gathered since the Layfield inquiry ended, that the electricity is still worth having at the price, why not let it go ahead? The fact that the Labour Party has said that, if elected at the general election, it would "phase out" nuclear power, in any case argues for such a step-by-step approach. No doubt a decision by the government to sanction a single plant would be called provocative, but this is part of a legitimate disagreement; but committing public resources now to a long-term programme could risk an imprudent waste. What nuclear power in Britain and elsewhere now most needs is a show of cautious deliberation by sponsors willing to insist that its virtues are judged on strictly economic grounds and that its custodians, the plant operators and their bosses, shoulder their public responsibilities squarely. □

Shades of 1968?

The Chirac government in France seems to have made a hash of its intended university reform.

JUST why General de Gaulle's government took such fright when the students built barricades in the streets of Paris in 1968 has never been crystal clear. The immediate fear was that the survival of a nationalist government representing a deeply conservative people would itself be threatened if the students' anarchical protest at a modest package of educational reforms were allowed to run its course. But the whole of France was shocked by the violence of the students' anger at M. Edgar Faure's proposals for reforming the French universities. The police fought the students at the barricades, but the government withdrew its reform package, replacing it by a more anodyne reform.

It is odd that the new Chirac government should have fallen into the same trap. Not much seems to have changed in a decade and a half. Although the Chirac government's proposals for university reform have many objectives in common with those of 1968, the ostentatious orderliness with which last week's protest began shows that the students were not at first out to make a revolution. The death of one student at the weekend after a beating from the police has inevitably changed the mood. The government, having backed down half-way in stages, is likely now to have to give in altogether.

So are the reforms dead and buried? Not quite. The issues that have angered the students will surface once again in the next few years. So they should, for they are necessary reforms. The complaint against the Chirac government is not that it has made itself look weak and even foolish, nor that it launched the reforms in the first place, but that, with such an important objective to accomplish, it assumed that it would be sufficient to use its majority in the French parliament to get the reforms on the statute books, without attempting to carry academic opinion with it.

The truth, nevertheless, is that the French university system is one of the more enduring relics of the eighteenth-century revolution. The principles are grand, as has been their practice for much of the intervening period. Able teenagers at generally excellent secondary schools qualify for university entrance by means of the nationally uniform school-leaving examination and are then, in principle, free to choose the university at which they enrol. France being France, it is inevitable that the University of Paris should have had to grow fastest under the pressure of unregulated demand, but most good institutions have been overwhelmed by numbers. One of the government's now-postponed goals was that institutions should be more able to regulate external demand by setting their own entrance requirements; a by-product would have been an element of diversity within a system which, for all its virtues, remains too much of the same piece. Can that be bad?

So what went wrong? The French government's most obvious miscalculation is to have underestimated the passions attaching to the right to university education. But in the absence of positive proposals for helping students find and choose the institutions that would best meet their individual needs — financial assistance for students in France goes very little further than the nominal tuition fees (which were in any case to have been increased) — it is inevitable that the proposals would have seemed unjust to many potential students. That is why whichever minister of education brings these proposals back to the French parliament should take care to do so within a wider framework. France is no different from most other countries in Western Europe in facing a long period during which the student age-groups will decline numerically just at the time when greater skill and technical competence are more necessary than ever. The case for managing an element of diversity within the university system is strong, but not at the cost of the quality and even quantity of the students it trains. □