

with the teaching of grammar) shall take no account of the volume of private support a university enjoys when deciding what its support from the public purse will be.

But somewhere, sadly, people seem to be having second thoughts. The Universities Funding Council (UFC) is now a going concern, with the head of the Cranfield Institute of Technology as its chairman. Although UFC will formally take over from its University Grants Committee (UGC) only on 1 April next, the beavers appear to be hard at work determining the rules by which it will operate. Some of these have been leaked to the press in the past few days, and one of them is the requirement that UFC will be entitled to enquire into the amount of a university's reserves.

This is a curious development, and has understandably incensed many university managers for reasons which the government appears unable to understand. For what the universities say, quite simply, is that there is nothing in their present relationship with UGC that sanctions such inquisitiveness, and the upshot of the debate about the education bill was that the government would retreat from the appearance of its first intentions to manage the universities from the centre as if they were so many branches in a chain of department stores. But how, the government seems to reply, can UFC exercise proper care of its dependants, both the whole flock of its charges and the individual chickens within it, unless it has some means of telling whether all of them are in good health? And what better way of doing that than by monitoring the private books?

The dangers, of course, are obvious. While UFC will be enjoined not to be prejudiced against universities successful in raising private funds, only exceptionally strong-minded people will be able to follow that precept in deciding what funds should be allocated to universities with ample reserves and those with none, especially when the going is rough. And while prejudice of this kind will be against the law as it now stands, there will be no way of proving that. UFC might simply say that it is not prejudiced against private funds, but merely against institutions that are well-off for whatever reason. In any case, nobody would be sent to gaol, for no penalties are specified. And the universities' indignation is probably misplaced, for even if UFC neglected to ask about their reserves, charity law would probably require that their value should be published once a year.

So is the row just another storm in a tea-cup? It would be good if it were so. But the suggestion that UFC should have such detailed powers of inspection over universities points to an inconsistency at the heart of its brave new policy. At the outset, when the Education Reform Bill was published, the government seemed bent on intervention, direction from the centre. With the passage of the bill, it seemed to have learned that there is merit in a system in which universities are made autonomous and are impelled towards the responsible conduct of their own affairs by the knowledge that, if they do otherwise, they will become second-rate, even third-rate, or may even go under altogether. In the long run, that is the way towards a greater diversity within the British system of higher education which, in turn, is what the British national interest requires. And that is why the caring supervisory role now being thrust on UFC by the government is at odds with what should be public policy. What is it about universities that makes British civil servants believe that they could run them more efficiently than those chosen by academics to do so?

Strangely, the government has also managed to offend its other constituency in higher education, the British polytechnics that will be detached from local authority control next April, and subject instead to an analogous funding council. Ironically, since the publication of the education bill over which the universities made such a fuss, the polytechnics have been generally more compliant, saying how much they welcomed the opportunity apparently on offer to run themselves in future as if they were businesses happening to be in the business of higher education. So why should the draft terms of the government's

instruction to the polytechnics' funding council lay down that institutions selling property they happen to own on 1 April will not necessarily be able to keep the whole of the proceeds for themselves? The obvious danger is that some of the city-centre polytechnics might be able powerfully to maximize their resources by selling off some of their sites and moving elsewhere. But would it necessarily be a bad thing that fuller use should be made of economic resources in this way? Or that some polytechnics might be able so to better themselves in the process that the quality of higher education would be significantly improved? To believe otherwise would be inconsistent with the government's whole philosophy. □

Uncensored Nature

A canard that Nature has withheld information about fallout from Chernobyl is untrue.

SOME Finnish newspapers last week carried a strange allegation to the effect that *Nature* has held up publication of data gathered in the weeks after the accident at Chernobyl on 6 April 1986, allegedly because of self-censorship. One version of the tale is that data have been suppressed for fear of giving offence to the British government, although the logic of that assertion is hard to credit: in the months following the accident, the British government seemed to this journal to be all too welcoming of alarming news, and all too ready to clap restrictions on sheep farmers. Would it not have been sustained by the publication of even more data, however scary?

The truth, sadly, is more mundane. In the weeks following the accident at Chernobyl, a great many notes were received reporting then recent measurements of fallout from the accident, and were quickly published without being refereed in the usual way. Predictably, the volume of correspondence quickly grew, and with it the prospect that other branches of science would be swamped by fallout measurements. There came a time, in the second half of 1986, when it seemed prudent to call a halt, but there were a large number of notes submitted for publication between the time the shutters came down and that at which the flow of intended publications tailed off. During this hiatus, some contributors were told that their notes would be published (for which the Editor takes personal responsibility). Those have been an embarrassment to *Nature* and to their authors ever since.

The obvious difficulty is that, with the passage of time, the information immediately available has been overtaken by more studied measurements and more careful analyses of them. At one stage, it seemed possible that these notes might be lent freshness by the publication of a symposium to mark the first anniversary of the accident, but that came to nothing, most probably because there had been too little time. Earlier this year, the Editor wrote to the, by then, frustrated contributors, canvassing their wishes but suggesting that the unpublished material would at that stage serve little purpose. Rather more than half, with more or less reluctance, agreed. The remainder, on a point of principle, think otherwise; in all probability, last week's report in the Finnish newspapers reflects the puzzlement of such a source. But the notion that *Nature* might be susceptible to censorship is the strangest fallout from Chernobyl.

The issue is all the more complicated because there remains much to say about the fallout from the Chernobyl accident, especially from the Soviet side. Elsewhere, there remains a great deal to be done in working towards a better understanding of the relationship between radiological exposure and human health. *Nature*, which has no wish to fall out with any part of the scientific community, has particular need of the assistance of the radiological community just now, and therefore apologizes to those members of it who are aggrieved. In return, it would ask that they do not give currency to a canard which is self evidently untrue. □