

British universities rebel

After a decade in which their resources and independence have been whittled away, British universities have uttered a cautious act of defiance. The government will be foolish if it tries to bring them to heel.

ONE of the best-known techniques of civil disobedience is for the disobedient to insist that they will do what is required of them only if compelled by law. From British India to Brezhnev's Soviet Union, there is ample proof that the technique is effective. Although a government's intentions may be crystal clear, the disobedient may correctly calculate that its humiliation in seeking to legitimize its whims would often be a deterrent. British universities now seem bent on borrowing from the same book of civil disobedience. Their response to the British government's assumption that they will help administer a scheme for awarding loans to students to cover part of their living costs has been classic Gandhi: on behalf of almost all British universities, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) has said that they will do as asked only if there is legislation to compel them.

It is a tortured tale. It is two years since the government set out to limit the direct cost of maintaining British students at British universities at roughly what it is at present. The simple solution would be to peg maintenance grants at their present value (£2,845 in London, £2,265 elsewhere, for the children of not-so-well-off families), but that would be unjust. So there will be a system of loans to supplement grants as they are eroded by inflation. The government already has the legislative authority to proceed. Its first conspicuous mistake was to announce that the commercial banks would administer the scheme without first having asked them.

After a year's uncertainty, the banks last December opted out from the invidious role of being the government's debt-collector among their own potentially most valuable customers. Now the government's casual assumption that the universities would do the job instead is also likely to be frustrated.

Issues

Mr John MacGregor, Secretary of State for Education and Science, says he will call the universities' bluff by arranging for the necessary legal authority, but that will not be simple. Although a suitable amendment to last year's Education Act could be drafted in ten minutes and no more than a dozen lines of text, carrying it through the British Parliament will be a major undertaking, raising again the whole question of whether the British government really understands what higher education is for.

To judge from appearances, it does not. The issue of

student loans is by no means the most serious of the indignities heaped on British universities in the past ten years, but it stems like others from the government's perverse preoccupation with the costs of the universities rather than their benefits. For this sector of the British public education system, policy seems to have flowed exclusively from the principle that costs must not increase. In this case, the government seems prepared to insist on the principle that higher education should not be subsidized in the face of mounting evidence that one of Britain's overwhelming problems in the decades ahead will be a scarcity of skilled people. One might have thought that a government as committed to market economics as the present British government might have worked out that grants should be increased at a time like this, not replaced by loans that are bound to seem more onerous.

Oddly enough, there are many even among the government's enemies who are sympathetic to the notion that a better system than the present should be found for persuading students to universities and for keeping them there. The present system of grants is poorly targeted at those who most need help. The objection to the loans scheme proposed is that it is ill thought-out, and that it will be impossible to administer fairly. The people best placed to devise a workable scheme — the universities themselves — have never been asked, but have only been told what they should do. It is no wonder that they have now rebelled.

What the government should now attempt is what it should have done at the beginning — to find a way of marrying its interest in capping what it spends on student support with universities' now much-sharpened interest in the idea that they should have sufficient students to teach. Yet as things are, hardly any British university is in a position to offer students it would especially welcome onto its books financial support of any kind. They need funds of the kind the government spends as statutory obligations to students, even if in smaller amounts. In return for help of that kind, the universities might well be persuaded to administer a loans scheme of some kind — but it would be better to start afresh, and find one that will work.

Is it too late for the government to swallow its pride and acknowledge that it must find a better way of doing an important job? □