

flurry of newspaper stories last week hinted that Pons had "vanished" — his house sold, his telephone disconnected, his son out of school — only days before the Fusion Advisory Committee of the State of Utah was to decide whether to continue its support of the National Cold Fusion Institute (NCFI) in Salt Lake City. Among many at the University of Utah, there was hope that, in the absence of any report from Pons or Fleischmann of what had been achieved over the past year, the NCFI would be gently put to sleep.

But it was not to be. Pons, communicating to the world by fax through his chosen representative C. Gary Triggs (a North Carolina attorney well known to critics of cold fusion for his careful reading of their papers), revealed that he was in France, and keen to take a sabbatical from the University of Utah. This was news to the university, it seemed. The Fusion Advisory Committee, evidently worried about the fate of the \$5 million so far spent on the NCFI but not yet ready to write off its investment, postponed its decision until 8 November, by which time a team of external reviewers is supposed to have scrutinized — in the space of a one-day visit — NCFI's progress. There are hints that Pons will visit Salt Lake City in time for the meeting on 8 November, but in the meantime Fritz Will, the director of NCFI, has publicly chastized Pons for his lack of cooperation. This suggests one model for the slow demise of cold fusion: like other failed revolutionary movements, it will disappear in a blizzard of factional fighting, the Marxist-Leninists (so to speak) and the Leninist-Marxists each professing to the same beliefs, but unable to stomach each other's company.

There is ample opportunity to make fun of these goings-on and, in the light of the history of cold fusion, no good reason not to. But if there is a serious comment to be made of this latest episode of the soap opera, it is perhaps to lament the inability of the Utah legislature to bring the proceedings to a halt. Pons did not appear at a meeting expressly held to decide the future of the NCFI, will not communicate with the institute's director, and yet the Fusion Advisory Committee still, apparently, feels obliged to grant the itinerant chemist another period of grace. If a total rebuff is not sufficient to dispel the committee's confidence in cold fusion, what will be? □

Universities for sale?

The British government's plan to turn British universities into commercial enterprises has backfired.

No good ever seemed likely to come of the latest scheme to make British universities compete against each other for public funds (see page 3). And so it has proved. But there is a kind of justice in the way in which this half-baked scheme has blown up in the faces of the government and of its designated hit-man, the Universities Funding Council (UFC). The obvious and demeaning error is UFC's miscalculation that, after a decade of offic-

ial beastliness towards British academic institutions, the universities would do anything for money. The underlying difficulty is the British government's attempt to hide continuing central control of higher education beneath a patina of illusory autonomy.

It is a sorry tale. Three years ago, when Mr Kenneth Baker's Great Education Reform Bill was rumbling through the British Parliament, the government floated the idea that British universities would be required under the new regime to negotiate contracts with the government for the provision of what might be called educational services (as is now required of Australian universities, for example). That proposal was shouted down, but UFC promptly devised a largely equivalent scheme — that universities would make money 'bids' for the privilege of teaching specified numbers of students in predefined fields. UFC was seeking a way of teaching larger numbers of students at less than the proportionately increased cost. Helpfully, it published figures (literally called "guide prices") for the notional cost of teaching students for a year in different fields of study. The idea was that universities wishing to expand in such a field would prudently submit a lower bid. UFC's intention was then to add together all the bids (for student numbers and for costs) so as to arrive at the most economical package.

So, guess what? Universities have submitted bid prices essentially the same as the guide prices put out by UFC. Collectively, they want to teach more students, but not at lower unit cost. UFC apparently accepts defeat, although it has not yet said how it will distribute its funds among its dependants in future years. (That is where the retribution will be felt.) Apparently the informal understanding reached by university vice-chancellors that they would not depart much from the guide prices will immediately be followed by a reference of the universities to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission — the nearest thing in Britain to anti-competition legislation.

This bidding fiasco derives directly from the government's confusion about its policy on higher education. For much of the past decade, it has sought to restrict student numbers. At the beginning of the decade, fearful that the cost of student maintenance would get out of hand, it required UFC's then predecessor to threaten universities with penalties if student quotas were exceeded, with the consequence that the system ran below capacity. The decision that there should be expansion instead has come only in the past three years. That welcome conversion to good sense is calamitously late. But at no stage during this long period has the British government been willing to contemplate an arrangement in which universities would be genuinely free to decide for themselves how they would balance the needs of students and research, of diversity and specialization. What nobody appreciates is that there are many universities in Britain that would gladly trade freedom for a little money. Ironically, the government may find that its aborted bidding system, by institutionalizing the guide prices, may have made it more difficult to win economies. □