A midsummer story about a python who swallowed two light bulbs reminds me vividly of the home life of our own dear Department of Education and Science. Apparently the serpent may have thought the bulbs were its own eggs.

The point of comparison is that the Department has always shown a distressing tendency to devour its own children. This "gastrimargite" (literally "raving stomach") desire can be traced back to the earliest times — to Cronos, the father of Zeus. Cronos, the suspicious Titan, swallowed his offspring out of a crazed jealousy that one of them might supplant him. One of them eventually did — Zeus — as the result of a titanic (literally) battle on Mount Olympus.

Zoom back now to the summer of 1986 from the year 776 BC (or thereabouts). DES begat him two sons — the Further Education Unit and the National Advisory Body to name but two of many — but in his Olympian majesty he was worried that they might be getting too big and powerful. He therefore had a mind to eat them, but could not make up his mind whether they should be stewed, boiled or bled like halal meat.

In addition, DES had an older son of whom he was inordinately fond — Lord Burnham. Although his heir was more than 60, it was patently obvious to all — even at last to DES himself — that Burnham was half-witted and would have to be put down like a well-loved retriever. Sadly DES took out the shot-gun from the cupboard and called out to his faithful retainer: "Burny, here boy! Time to go walkies".

But there was also a half-brother to DES — the MSC — and from his seat on Olympus DES could see him waxing every day nearer and bolder. While pretending to work together and help this half-brother, DES was secretly plotting his downfall. No humble torture nor ritual sacrifice was in his mind. For DES planned to relax his jaws and swallow his hated half-brother whole one day when they were both out playing together.

The curious case of the FEU

The rise and fall of the Further Education Unit within the household of DES is sadly one of the court favourite who strutted about and spoke too openly of his ambition. Founded in 1976-77 to give the DES a lever on the FE curriculum and to carry out badly needed reforms, the FEU rose high in DES's esteem. They produced an attractive answer, wrapped up in the latest skill-speak, for the 17-plus examination enabling Olympian DES to snub the Schools Council with its wishy-washy CEE.

Civil servants petted and feted the FEU extolling its virtues (obedience and loyalty being two) to Ministers. FEU were called in to sort out the mess of the CPVE (for a mess is what it had become by this stage). DES's two pet adult education programmes — PICKUP and REPLAN — were given to the FEU as the obedient servant to administer. It became a limited company — the next best thing to privatisation — and prospered mightily. It was the zingiest, trendiest quango in town. And while the mate was carving up the Schools Council with his snickersnee, the cabin boy played...
and sang all day little dreaming that his turn would come.

Now it took Sir Keith Joseph three years as Secretary of State to “discover” further education and four years to get to know adult education. But when he did make these discoveries he took home tome after tome of FEU publications to devour late at night in his basement in Kensington. He evidently found them a cure for or an alternative to insomnia, for he pronounced them “virtuous but boring”. At the end of one volume he complained to an official: “That’s all very well, you keep telling me how good the FEU is, but I have read 600 pages and have not found the word ‘market’ once”.

Although the official hastened to reassure Sir Keith that the market philosophy was implicit in all that the FEU said or did, the doubts were sown. Sir Keith’s close friend David Young was telling him, too, that the FEU sector was not responsive enough to industry’s needs and needed to be shown the right direction by the MSC. Worse, the FEU was actively criticising the MSC’s philosophy and methodology.

Now it happens that on the Olympian heights of Elizabeth House, where dwell the Titans and their cup-bearers like the FEU, nearly one third of the demi-gods are called Smith, a third Jones (the abiding Welsh influence on British education) and most of the rest Thomson (with or without a p). So letters and memos often go astray. Thus it came to pass that the full extent of the gods’ growing anger with the FEU became known.

But the full extent of the “gastrimargia” did not become known until July, when the DES notified the unit they were “under review”. It then emerged that the review consisted mainly in the choice of death. The FEU was either to be handed over to the new National Council for Vocational Qualifications (like a young delinquent being handed over to the beadle), or put out to grass with the Further Education Staff College. The third alternative seemed to be starvation — to be allowed to survive but on a diminishing budget.

**The nibbling of NAB**

“Gastrimargia” or the craving of the ravenous belly has been known to drive Eskimos to cannibalise their own children and rugby teams lost in the Andes to devour their own team mates. Sometimes, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac, “gastrimargia” arises from intense love or a religious fervour.

But how does one explain the incessant urge of the DES to create new quangos, spawning them all the time despite a Prime Ministerial ordinance to the contrary, and then to kill, maim, devour, merge, digest, dissolve the offspring? Is it the urge of the stag to see off rivals or the wolf to kill the weakest in the pack?

In the case of the NAB for public sector higher education the writing is clearly already on the wall. Indeed the DES have already started nibbling at this body -- taking away teacher training functions here and architecture there. “We will get rid of NAB after the next election”, said Sir Keith’s political adviser Stuart Sexton four years ago. But NAB is still here and Sexton’s knell has tolled instead.

NAB board chairman Christopher Ball has clearly made a hit with the new Secretary of State Mr Kenneth Baker, writing him witty notes in Anglo-Saxon verse and advising him on student loans. Indeed Mr Ball’s name is even being widely floated as the new chairman on Kenneth Baker’s new committee of inquiry into the teaching of English grammar.

But NAB’s problem is that of the misbegotten. It is not the DES’s own pure blood
royal and carries a strong plebeian vial within its veins from its local authority parentage. Instead of carrying out commands from Mount Olympus to rationalise and concentrate higher education it moans and whimpers and sometimes answers back. It threatens to close colleges and courses in politically inconvenient places like Huddersfield and Devon. While the UGC gets on with the grisly business like a well-disciplined lobollyman whistling Hearts of Oak and England Expects, NAB takes up political postures and frightens the daylights out of parents with estimates of places and courses lost in the polys and colleges, while everybody knows the registrars can cram some more students in if they want to.

"Mene mene tekel upharsin". NAB has been weighed in the scales and found wanting. Better to melt down the base metal in the burning fiery furnace.

But are we now, in the summer holiday season of 1986, in the last stretch of placid water before the merging of two great rivers? I mean the merger of the DES and the MSC with the dissolution of the Department of Employment. That is clearly what the Secretary of State for Employment Lord Young of Graffham has been urging on the Prime Minister—no doubt with the hope of taking over the merged portfolio and becoming the first ever Minister for Education and Training in 1988.

There is a new glint in the eye of DES civil servants as they measure up the MSC and sharpen their snickersnees. But who exactly will gobble up whom? The oncoming set-to will not be so much a Battle of the Titans as a Battle of the Pythons.