

A REGULAR visitor would have been surprised: all the parking places were taken. Latecomers had squeezed their cars into corners, rolled them on to the raked gravel paths and finally let them spill down the drive. Coming to the Royal Swedish Academy of Science for the first of last week's Nobel Prize announcements was rather exciting. The second and third times were less so. It only took one visit to realise that the parking jam was not caused by eager newsmen, but by sedate Academicians meeting in traditional session; that the low murmur heard in the imposing lobby was not because the crowd was tense and suppressed, but because it was very small; and that the single flex snaking up the stairs, pregnant with promises of a media extravaganza, led in fact to the only microphone present.

Could it, realistically, have been otherwise? Like all businesses, the media invests large amounts of resources only with the prospect of a payoff. And today's Nobel Prizes for Science do not make newspapers sell. Gone are the days when the names of even scientific laureates were likely to be household words. Gone even are the days when scientists active in the same subject were certain to know of the winners. What physicist working before the mid-1950s had never heard of Fermi, Blackett or Cockcroft? Today's laureates are unlikely to be known outside their own specialisations.

This is not to question the distinction or value of the contributions made by the present prizewinners. It is merely to recognise the greatly increased scope of scientific endeavour, the pervasiveness of specialisation and the replacement of the individual scientist working in his laboratory by the team. Small wonder that the old doyens, known by all in the subject, no longer exist.

It should not really have been surprising to find so few newsmen there. The trends which have influenced the development of science have, after all, also left their mark on the reporting of it. The scope and teamwork of newsgathering has been dramatically broadened by the wire services. What role can be played by the individual pressman—be he ever so enthusiastically crouched over his telephone—in the face of the news giants whose technology will have bounced the headlines across the globe almost before he has had time to dial his number? Those few reporters who went to the Academy's announcements swapped stories about how it used to be when news sleuths concocted elaborate schemes to get the laureates' names out first: when they held lines open in local telephone boxes and waited for

the names to be communicated by pre-arranged signals from collaborators inside the Academy building—and what happened once when a man sufficiently like the key informant to be mistaken for him came out and innocently lit a cigarette, thereby putting into action an intricately planned (and later highly embarrassing) series of events.

A prize system which rewards individuals when teamwork dominates scientific research, and which rewards so few individuals when so many are now in the field, is bound to cause some

Letter from Sweden

from Wendy Barnaby, Stockholm

disenchantment. In spite, and partly because, of this, the distinction of being a science laureate is as high as ever. If the reporters' indifference is easy to understand, so also is the winners' delight.

● Sweden's ambitious nuclear energy programme is amply underpinned by the country's uranium resources, which are estimated to be the West's largest in the price range (1968 figures) of \$10–15 a pound (cheaper uranium can be mined for less than \$10 a pound). Knowing it is there is not the same as getting it out, however. The State Power Board, the government-owned nuclear energy research company AB Atomenergi and the mining firm LKAB are keen to start extracting uranium from 15 km² around South Billingen, about 350 km south-west of Stockholm. But they are not the only ones with their eyes on the area. To begin with, the region is populated and the soil is good for agriculture and forestry. Cultural historians prize it for its dozens of ancient monuments (including five gravesites dating from the Iron Age). In view of this, the military's interest seems particularly callous: they want to use it for a shooting range. And there has also been talk of the suitability of the land for limestone mining.

● Sweden and Yugoslavia are expanding their scientific cooperation. Under an agreement signed recently in Stockholm, scientists and experts from the two countries will exchange visits of 10 person-months a year, symposia will be held and the traffic of scientific and technical journals enlivened. A spokesman for the Royal Academy of Engineering Sciences, which negotiated the agreement, said that the specific areas of cooperation had not yet been decided but that they would be in applied rather than basic science.

The agreement is similar to those Sweden has with other East European countries in that, although each sig-

natory can nominate scientists it would like to host, the final decision rests with the other's authorities. In this sense it is a less exciting arrangement than that concluded this year between the Swedes and the Russians, in which each undertook to send the specific experts requested by the other. In practice, of course, this aspect of the undertaking may make very little difference to the work actually done. For the moment, it is enough that each side wants the volume of this work to increase.

● Asbestos, and its use in working environments, is the subject of new regulations issued by the Swedish Work Protection Board. In the face of increased consciousness of the dangers of exposure to asbestos dust, the victims of which at present number about 200 (including some cases of lung cancer), the new regulations aim to minimise its use, to regulate unavoidable use and to educate the users to the dangers involved.

Sweden uses about 30,000 tons of asbestos annually, half of it raw and half in the form of ready-made products such as asbestos cement. Although its use is being discontinued where substitutes can be found—as in the manufacture of torpedo boats—it seems difficult to replace it totally with safe materials. Brake linings, for example, still depend on asbestos to withstand great heat. Given this situation, total protection of the working population from this particular environmental hazard still looks to be some way off.

● Taking measures to improve working conditions is not Sweden's only activity in this area. "The working environment" is one of the obligatory subjects for students beginning university-level education in trade techniques. This autumn, eight trial courses in the techniques of the clothing, food, paper, forestry, workshop and steel industries are being held around Sweden for people who have had basic training and at least four years of employment in one of these fields. The idea is to educate experienced workmen for more responsible positions—vocational trainers, production and control technicians, foremen—within the various industries.

At Eskilstuna, to the west of Stockholm, 30 employees from different workshops—among them, sheet-metal workers and tool-makers—are starting a course that will demand 40 hours a week for three terms. Besides "the working environment", they are taking off with six subjects: Swedish, physics, mathematics, materials, drawing and organisation. There seems to be no uncertainty about their employment prospects after the course. □