

nature*July 29, 1976*

Making it in the Civil Service

It is now eight years since the Fulton Report on the British Civil Service advocated fairly comprehensive reforms in many aspects of the service, ranging from recruitment policies and staff training to job categorisation. Eight years is not a long period for an organisation with such inbuilt momentum as the Civil Service, but the Select Committee on Expenditure of the House of Commons deems it time to have a look at the way reform has been progressing. Last week was the turn of the Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS), the body which represents professional, technical and scientific civil servants, to give its first evidence.

This past year hasn't been a particularly good one for the Civil Service. It has been the victim of a fairly regular stream of what the IPCS called "unfair attacks" and what others might call penetrating questioning of its role; the mutterings—and much more that hasn't surfaced—can be fairly clearly associated with the privileged position in which the civil servant finds him or herself at the moment. There has always, of course, been grumbling about job security and its dulling effect; the complaints have recently been about the way in which salaries and pension rights in the public sector seem to have become so much more favourable than those in the private sector, in which there is little job security.

It is, then, inevitable that what civil servants say about themselves and their situation is looked at in a rather hawk-eyed way; the IPCS at least didn't fall into the trap of telling the committee its members were underpaid. But they are, it was claimed, underprivileged—the words "second class" kept cropping up. In short, the IPCS believes there has not been a proper commitment by the Civil Service Department to implementing Fulton recommendations on removing vertical barriers between different classes or categories, notably the Administrative, Professional and Scientific categories. At the very top this has been done, at least formally, though whether it means much is questionable. What the IPCS would like to see is the removal of category labels much further down the system, in the hopes that this would allow policy-making and management prospects to open up at all levels for those who are at present confined by being 'professionals' or scientific'.

For all the IPCS's professed admiration for the administrators, this move is a thinly disguised assault on the

administrative citadel wherein, in the spirit of the genteel class warfare that is alleged to go on in the Civil Service, are housed the first-class characters who really have all the power and make all the decisions. Scientists, of course, run their own laboratories, so the call by the IPCS must be seen as an attempt to broaden the stage on which their members can operate.

There are problems. The first is that the IPCS, in making the point elsewhere in their submission that the distinction between generalists (that is, administrators) and specialists is artificial, acknowledges that administration contains a range of specialisms such as finance, accounts, contracts, personnel and computers and indeed that "public administration itself is a specialism". If we are all specialists now, the administrators will prove as defensive about opening up their ranks as would scientists about having administrators join them in some scientific venture.

The second problem is the sort of person who might be helped by such schemes. Outstanding professionals find their way to the top and go where they want to go without the need for much outside help. There is, however, a much greater number of what might be called the solid and reliable, and a real and as yet unsolved difficulty inherent in Civil Service use of professionals is how to prevent the solid and reliable from becoming disheartened, maybe as early as their mid-thirties, at the lack of prospects. But are there large numbers of jobs going begging in the administration categories or are there posts that ought to be created to allow these people to spread their wings? There are, after all, many solid and reliable administrators who are also likely to be in pursuit of such posts. The challenge then, is to the IPCS to do some extensive research and provide the Select Committee with some formidable evidence, down to chapter and verse, that there really are, as Fulton asserted, a significant number of jobs in the service, requiring both technical and managerial ability, which could be filled by technical people and which at present are not.

We have in the past advocated more radical approaches to the problem, particularly the golden handshake and enhanced mobility into and out of the service, but we believe that a detailed case is worth making for a different sort of solution. □