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# Problems of civil service pay comparisons

Last Friday, many tens of thousands of scientists and technologists, members of the British Civil Service, went on strike for a day. More action — withdrawal of goodwill and selective strikes — is promised by the Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS), which represents about 90% of the civil servants in the relevant categories. For the majority of those who obeyed the strike call, a day away from work probably provided a welcome opportunity to catch up with some reading, secure in the knowledge that the nation's scientific and technological future is hardly put in jeopardy by a day's absence. But IPCS does have muscle; although its officials were at pains to point out that the day was one of protest not disruption, highly visible disruption there certainly was in the area of air traffic control.

Few of those involved in the strike action can have gone as far as this before — what caused the normally moderate and restrained IPCS to use its ultimate weapon? The answer, put simply, is pay, and in particular comparisons between the pay of civil servants and their counterparts outside the service. IPCS negotiates with Civil Service Department (CSD) officials (ultimately with the Minister of State for the Civil Service Department, Mr Paul Channon) over salary. There was a time when the pay for each of the many grades of scientist and technologist was established by a process of 'pay research' — painstaking comparisons were made between industry, commerce, the professions and the Civil Service in order to decide a fair level of remuneration. On the whole these comparisons were based on median salaries outside the Civil Service, but there was one significant exception — the Professional and Technological group of employees, (not the scientists), numbering about 40,000. Traditionally their pay settlements had been at well above the median of outside salaries on the basis that many outsiders, in fields such as architecture and surveying, were in business by themselves and not included in the comparisons, that there were heavy responsibilities and demands of very high quality on civil servants and so on.

Severe pay restraint from 1975 onwards meant an abandonment of pay research at a time when Civil Service salaries looked good — even better if pensions' provisions and stability of employment were allowed for. Since that time there is little doubt that the scientists and technologists in the Civil Service have lost their edge on salaries, and as pay research has gradually come back into action the extent of the increases necessary to bring civil servants back into line has become apparent. The Professional and Technology grade has been offered comparability with the median (raises of between 15% and 22%) rather than comparability with a figure well above the median — CSD rejected IPCS demands that the former grounds for favourable treatment be retained.

It had already been agreed that the Science Group (around 17,000 people) should not go back into pay research comparisons until 1980, and last year CSD declared in writing that it was 'context to accept' IPCS's proposal that for 1979 scientists' pay should be linked to that of administrators. But when administrators got an increase of 25% or more, CSD were unwilling to match the salaries for scientists. It has since done so (on 15 June) but only on condition that future pay for scientists should be based on pay research, even if this should lead to salary reductions next year, and that P & T grades would also abide by pay research (at the median, presumably).

What is behind all this? On the P & T side it is clear that the Government is unconvinced that settlements above the median are now called for, believing that they were based on a small number of special cases. On the Science side, there seem to be unambiguous warnings that the 1980 recommendations from pay research are not going to be very good news; one CSD official commented that there was a possibility that pay research, although not for implementation until 1980, 'might be relevant to the course we should take in 1979'. In other words, brace yourselves for a nasty shock.

There is a real problem here. The heart of the Scientific Civil Service is the two thousand or so Principal Scientific Officers. This is a level up to which many scientists will be moved in their late thirties but out of which relatively few will be promoted. So most PSOs will work at this grade for twenty years or more. Scientists outside the Civil Service are unlikely to be in anything like the same situation, so pay research comparisons at the PSO level (and maybe even just below it) are difficult, to say the least. As a consequence this may lead to depressed salaries.

That scientists and technologists need a pay boost is beyond doubt; the steady trickle of young computer people, for example, out of the service and into industry has to be stopped. But on the other hand salaries which look so good in comparison with industry when that industry is denuded of good people undoubtedly jeopardise Britain's industrial future. So some fine balancing has to be done.

What is in danger of being lost, however, in the heightened temperature of a strike, is the long-term need for a very serious review of the use that the nation should be making of its older scientists. It keeps them in laboratories well beyond the time many of them can (by their own admission) make an adequate contribution; their way into other parts of the Civil Service is barred, despite the benefits that numerate, scientific thinking might bring. As part of any settlement, IPCS and CSD ought to agree to look very carefully at the problem of the Principal Scientific Officer. □