Correspondence

Smiles at the Unobtrusive

SIR,—A second round of supercilious comment on my quantitative estimates of scientific manpower (*Nature*, April 4, 1970, p. 10) leaves me wondering about the status of my unknown assailant. It reminds me of the regrets expressed long ago in these columns that perhaps the editor of *Nature* was being confused with its author. At all events I protest the imperious editorial attitude and remind you that the protecting shelter of anonymity carries an implied responsibility in speaking for the British scientific community. One would have no objection to a signed statement by a mere person who might find that my (or any other) social science investigation of scientists was distasteful or even loathsome. Indeed, the resistance of scientists to such intrusive examinations of themselves is well known, and though it is not pleasant, it has been a most illuminating and revealing topic of serious discussion and analysis by sociologists of science. With an unsigned editorial it is different. It surely ill behoves scientists in Britain to countenance an official attitude of this sort towards serious social science investigations into such things as the geographic distribution of scientific manpower, and any regularities and laws there might be connecting such parameters with other demographic variables. Such investigations have long exercised my respected colleagues in several countries and are hallowed by Unesco and OECD. British science policy is neither so competent and well managed nor so replete with reliable statistics that the establishment can afford just to smile at things which may be learned from these unobtrusive indicators of the deployment of our resources.

I ignored the first round of editorial humour (*Nature*, **217**, 793; 1968), supposing that its purpose was merely to amuse the readers or to draw me into a personal controversy in which opinions of scientists about science might be entertaining. My attitude towards my work is, however, not much different from that of a physicist or a chemist towards theirs. I do not publish with the principal objective of debate for an amusable public, but in the hope of adding something to knowledge before the audience of peers. If *Nature* contains on its editorial staff or among contributors those who are seriously critical and competent in the matters of estimates of scientific manpower and literature, let them speak and be very welcome indeed. The concept of a "publishing scientist" is open to a great deal of uncertainty but it gives a consistent body of reasonable laws and hopefully a rather useful analysis of a difficult problem that I would be happy to see discussed. If not, I think that the editor of *Nature* would be well advised to check the boisterousness of that part of himself that would poke fun at the antics of social scientists. The tradition of William Petty to actuarial arithmetic is not to be mocked by those who are that contemptuous of their colleagues as to think it stupid to count anything so individual and so beyond the reach of science as a human being or a "publishing scientist".

Yours faithfully,

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Mediocrity of Ks

SIR,—N. W. Pirie (*Nature*, May 23, 1970) is wrong in supposing that the learned societies discriminate against alphabetical tail-enders. An inspection of the London Telephone Directory—whose subscribers we presume to be an alphabetical cross-section of London's population—has a mid-point approximately at "Kingsley" (towards the end of the Ks). This is presumably because of the infrequency of names beginning with Q, U, V, X, Y and Z.

The mid-points of the lists of members of the learned societies mentioned by Pirie therefore occur where they would be expected to (allowing for some statistical variations expected in small samples) were there no alphabetical discrimination.

Yours faithfully,

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Divisions among Kings

SIR,—Mr Pirie (*Nature*, May 23, 1970) suggests that there is a forward shift in the alphabet in name lists of persons recruited on the basis of apparent merit. This suggestion was based on a comparison of the list of members of the Royal Society and the National Academy of Sciences (mid-point in the Ks) with the membership lists of the Biochemical and Nutrition Societies (mid-point in the Ls). It is true that one would not expect to find selection in the latter case, and this prompted me to look in other, presumably unbiased, lists that happened to be handy, with the following results: Institute of Physics and Physical Society 1966 membership list, mid-point KING; Institute of Metals 1964/65 list, KHAN; resident members of the University of Oxford 1968/69, men KING, women KENT; the Oxford Area telephone directory 1969 (which includes businesses and institutions), KINGFEAST. The name KING is again found by opening in the middle the 3360 page *Who's Who 1958*.

The 1969 list of fellows of the Royal Society, excluding royalty and foreign members, shows that the mid-point is at KENT, so there is, after all, surely nothing to suggest that there has been any alphabetical bias in the selection of the fellowship. What is peculiar is the apparent backward shift into the Ls of the membership of the Biochemical and Nutrition Societies as reported by Mr Pirie.

Yours faithfully,

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Dr Bruce and Astrophysics

SIR,—In two reports published by the Electrical Research Association in 1955 and 1958 (refs. 1 and 2) Dr C. E. R. Bruce showed that the electrification of dust in cosmic atmospheres, and the breakdown of the resulting electric fields in electrical discharges, would account for the data of astrophysics in general and the radiation from and