

## Should scientists be re-auditioned?

In general artists live by their wits and survive through being productive. If they are painters they must continue to paint and sell. If they are musical performers they must continue to keep a high standard of performance—in an orchestra that will mean a regular re-audition. It is a ruthless existence and yet one about which few of those involved in it, or even those who were once involved in it and have been left behind, feel bitter. There is often a feeling that the state should support an orchestra, an art gallery, a theatre, but rarely do individual creative or performing artists reckon that the state owes them a living. Indeed it is thought quite natural that they should move into teaching when they find their other abilities waning, without in any sense regarding teaching as an inferior profession.

What is it about scientists and the scientific profession which makes the idea of something even remotely similar amongst themselves unthinkable? In certain trades and professions it is possible to point to an accumulation of worldly goods which prevents any major changes in course—a taxi-cab, a workbench and tools, dental equipment. In others, more experience makes for greater capability as time goes on. Politicians, priests, bartenders probably feel that way. But a scientist neither owns his tools (beyond a relatively few books and journals of current use to him) nor demonstrably improves with age, unless he be in the business of cataloguing or collecting. Why then should he dig in for life, as he is very prone to?

One reason, of course, is that it is a very pleasant life, involving lots of travel, and in terms of service many scientists are near to being self-employed without the financial responsibilities that self-employment involves. Another is that the outside world seems to offer a great deal less stability, if it offers anything at all. Yet another is that scientists often delude themselves that it is creditable to go on working on the same old problems, gradually chipping them away, when the very last thing that most scientific problems need is the attention of one man, often to the exclusion of others, for thirty to forty years.

The community of older scientists must inevitably continue to grow for the foreseeable future and at some time governments, industry and academe are bound to have to ask whether the ranks of an ageing workforce can be allowed to continue to swell. This question is indeed being faced now by many institutions, world-wide, which sprang up in response to immediate post-war defence needs. Academics can maybe justify themselves by increased teaching and administrative loads and a growing involvement in maintaining the standards of

the college wine cellar. Others have no such outlets unless they are specifically plucked out of 'science' and dropped into 'administration'; and this is said to be a move that few are allowed to make.

There is a case, then, for scientists to come up with some fairly concrete proposals on the employment of older members of the profession before the government or other large scale employers step in with their own schemes for thinning the ranks. And perhaps some sort of re-auditioning system should be discussed in conjunction, of necessity, with an extensive rethinking of the career structure of scientists. It is obviously pointless to urge or even force someone out of his laboratory without any guarantee that other jobs can be found which do not involve a humiliating change.

If at the present this is not so, then it is time that scientists as a community started talking seriously about their prospects. It is only depressing that in Britain at present there is not a suitable forum for this, although we suggest elsewhere in this issue (page 743) that the British Association ought to become a gathering of thoughtful scientists. Then ultimately it should be possible to approach the government with rather specific proposals that every year a substantial number of intelligent, well trained and experienced men would be available at ages between, say, 35 and 50 for redeployment—and what could be available within the public and educational sector? The answer would, of course, be nothing, but a start would have been made in asking important questions about skilled manpower. It is impossible to believe that in reality such men are unemployable when there is an apparent shortage of intellect all around.

Many scientists would, we believe, welcome the opportunity to use formal review points in their career, perhaps every five years between 35 and 50, to make a sideways step as a means of self-regeneration. In that way the audition could almost be a self-audition. But they should not expect jobs to be waiting for them unless they have done a lot of hard lobbying first.

## A hundred years ago



ON Friday evening M. Flammarion, the French astronomer, started from La Villette gas-works, Paris, in a balloon called *Lumen*, at half-past seven, with a brisk breeze from the north-west. The balloon was under the guidance of M. Jules Godard, and M. Flammarion, who was married in the beginning of August, was on board with his young wife; he wishes to spend his *lune de miel* in Italy. Such a trip was proposed in the beginning of the century to the celebrated M<sup>de</sup> de Stael by the great philosopher, Saint-Simon; but the lady declined. The moon was full and bright.

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