

**nature***July 10, 1975*

## Good for people, bad for science

ONE of the merits of democracy is not simply that it gives people the chance to choose whom they want to govern but also that it gives them the chance to say whom they do not want. In particular the democratic process makes it possible to say to a government—enough, we don't like the way you do things, it's time to try another way. The ability to reject as well as to accept seems to be a necessary part of most human endeavour, at least any endeavour in which there is any concept of growth or evolution. Foolish would be the person prepared to take on any commitment from which there seemed to be no means of escape, if needed, and foolish are those who try to make the means of escape humiliating, expensive or distasteful.

The development of science also shows the rejection mechanism in action; not simply in the process by which the scientific manuscript has to stand the test of peer review, but also in the endless self-criticism which the good scientist applies to his ideas long before they are committed to paper and in the rapid way in which the scientific community works over published material seeking out errors and inconsistencies.

It is strange that, although we recognise the need that scientific ideas should not only have a platform but should also have to face a barrage of rotten eggs, we are unbelievably cautious when it comes to the scientist himself. If the idea doesn't make the grade, it won't last six months; if the scientist doesn't make the grade—well he's got tenure and could be around for another thirty years.

Job security is, of course, an excellent thing in many ways. It reassures those who set out on long and sometimes tedious intellectual pathways that they are not going to have to worry about keeping in favour with their employer or about producing quick results simply in order to stay in business. It keeps the universities and the Civil Service away from any form of external threat to their pursuit of knowledge. But at what cost?

Tenure is a virtual guarantee that the system will either agree indefinitely to your doing what you want to do or that it will find you another job if the present one gets too much. This is a very humane and

enlightened practice but it bears little relationship to a world in which the demands on science are changing rapidly; it also takes no notice of the propensity of science to proceed by revolution. Further, although keeping in favour with one's employer is not necessary to being a good scientist, science, even within universities, does call for a certain amount of management, and the need for management is bound to increase. Yet if managers lack the ultimate sanction of being able to dispense with those who cannot or will not contribute effectively, management has one hand tied behind its back.

The pressures in recent years have been rather obviously towards increasing job security in universities (the Civil Service is already about as secure as the priesthood) and there is talk now of giving laboratory technicians some sort of tenure. Such pressures ought to be firmly resisted and, if anything, there should be serious discussions about reversing the trend. It would obviously be silly to put the academic or governmental scientist on to a three-months' notice basis, but few could complain of indecent haste if a contract came up for renewal on both sides once every ten years. There might be stronger support for such an idea within the scientific community than is generally realised.

Such a procedure would also permit the at present almost impossible operation of closing down a department to be carried out relatively bloodlessly within the space of a few years when necessary.

The standard objection to any loosening of the tenure grip is to point to the problems of those who would be turned out after many years of service. The answer to that is that there are already many careers in which there comes a day of reckoning; perhaps the most analogous is the military profession. If the change is intelligently anticipated and financially assisted there is no reason why it should be a humiliating experience at all. Indeed, for all we know, the release every year of a few hundred scientists into a more general environment might encourage industry and commerce to use them imaginatively. After all, not every retired Major runs a sweet shop. □