

correspondence

Good for science?

SIR.—Your editorial "Good for people, bad for science" (July 10) requires a prompt comment, for you apparently advocate a major change in the system of academic tenure. At the same time, your editorial seems to indicate neither an awareness of the complexity of the issue, nor of experience with alternative tenure systems, nor of the considerable literature in this area; I refer here primarily to the tenure system that is very widely used in the USA, the role of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the many articles and books in which this subject has been discussed.

Tenure is generally awarded, in US colleges and universities, after a probationary period that should be long enough to provide sufficient time for a reliable assessment of the capabilities and promise of a faculty member, yet should not be so short as to lead to an unacceptable proportion of bad decisions. The AAUP guideline of a maximum probationary period of seven years is widely followed, but universities will often award tenure much earlier in an attempt to hold on to younger people of exceptional ability. This does not, of course, ensure that all those who have tenure will continue to merit it, and removal for cause (including demonstrated incompetence, as decided by an elected faculty committee) is recognised, though rare.

The major benefit conferred by tenure is the freedom that faculty members should then have to study, discuss and explore without fear, views and topics that may be highly unpopular or controversial at that time. Most scientists pursue careers that are models of conformity and caution, but some may wish to be more adventurous. Research involving human subjects raises strong passions—consider the continuing debates over foetal research and genetic engineering. If these scientists were subject to renewable contracts, it is safe to predict that, for many, caution would increase as the renewal date approached, and topics that may seem of major scientific interest would be neglected if adequate protection could not be guaranteed for those who wished to work on them. These are not hypothetical fears of imaginary but unlikely situations: these pressures on the academic community exist and should be recognised.

There is another serious objection to the proposal for contracts: who would review them and make the decisions on renewal? A senior administrative officer in the university or in White-hall? With what advice? Or a group of faculty members or the department chairman? One may reasonably claim that professional competence can only be judged by others in the same discipline, but this is more likely to lead to leniency on the part of the reviewers in the hope of similar treatment when their own renewals come up. Leaving the decision to a department head carries other risks: renewal will provide an excellent opportunity to get rid of the abrasive members of the faculty. Indeed, extensive AAUP experience has shown that a major proportion of the threats to faculty members come from other faculty members and from department heads and deans who were once also faculty members. Overall, the apparently attractive idea of renewable contracts bristles with severe problems of implementation, and should not be lightly suggested without at the same time treating this side of the suggestion.

It is not only on the frontiers of research that feelings become inflamed and faculty positions are threatened. Some of us hope that more university scientists will become engaged in what Ravetz has termed 'critical science' (*Scientific Knowledge and its Social Problems*, Oxford University Press, 1971). This involvement in current issues should not need to be partisan but can be in the direction of elucidating complex technical issues to a broader public. Here again, these scientists need the protection of tenure, for, it is clear, those employed in industrial and government laboratories do not have the freedom to engage in these issues unless they are generally on the side of their sponsors. University science departments will probably provide virtually the only source of independent comment, and these scientists will not be able to play a responsible role if their jobs are in jeopardy. Here again, this is not some hypothetical possibility: as 'critical' science has slowly developed in the USA, government and industrial scientists have been conspicuous by their silence.

Those of us who have had experience in faculty matters, with tenure and with the AAUP, recognise that the weakness of the tenure system is the

protection it extends to those who prefer to relax and do little or nothing, but most of us consider this is a modest price to pay for the many advantages. A tenure system can operate no better than those who have to make the decisions; some decisions will be good and others bad. A recent thorough examination of the tenure system (*Faculty Tenure*, Commission on Academic Tenure; W. R. Keast, chairman; Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1973) produced a strong endorsement.

In summary, then, your editorial is disappointing. Perhaps the British universities' tenure system does need overhaul; perhaps a probationary period similar to that in the USA should be considered, along with a greater involvement of the non-professorial faculty in matters of faculty promotion and tenure. But I would hope that notice is taken of the extensive and documented experience before adopting a contract system that has a superficial appeal but is potentially severely detrimental to academic freedom.

Yours faithfully,

M. W. FRIEDLANDER

*Washington University,
St Louis, Missouri 63130*

Fellows overseas

SIR.—I can well understand the frustration felt by UK postdoctoral fellows overseas as described by Richard James (August 7). Since I doubt that the "structure of the UK University system" will change, I can perhaps do a little to put the position straight, at least as I see it from my department, and make a suggestion.

All of us want very much to appoint the best people to the few lectureships available. Our system of advertising the posts as soon as we are assured of the finance is not only efficient but is fair and should not be classified as ponderous. It would unnecessarily delay matters to set a deadline for receipt of applications which gave time for the advertisements to be seen by all potential applicants overseas. In my experience we never keep strictly to the deadline, and will always consider late applicants and give special consideration to those who are overseas. A brief airmail statement to the effect that a formal application is on the way is certainly helpful. In short I do not believe that the heads of departments handling the regrettably