

**nature**

22 September 1977

## Room at the top — for whom?

REPORTS on the state of British industry, its use of qualified scientists and engineers, the attitude of young people towards an industrial career and recipes for supposed improvements are now descending on the office in such profusion that we can no longer guarantee even to collect them from our harassed reception before dispatching them, bundled in their thousands, to a company warehouse somewhere outside Basingstoke, there to be pulped. Two recent arrivals, however, somehow crept under the door and so have at least been afforded a cursory glance by our jaded editorial staff. They are 'Education, engineers and manufacturing industry', a report to the British Association for the Advancement of Science by a small investigating team, and 'University-industry relations', the government's reply to some recommendations made by the Common's Select Committee about a year ago.

At that time, we were critical of several of these recommendations, which seemed rather poorly worked out, at least in the case of the proposed revival of the concept of SISTERS, Special Institutions for Scientific and Technological Education and Research, a step in the wrong direction of isolating science and technology from the broader world. The government's response is equally unenthusiastic, indeed its paper as a whole reads like a long succession of "we don't think this is a good idea", "we think this is a good idea and it is already happening", "we think this is a good idea but someone else should do something about it". The someone else is, of course, industry.

But one recommendation commended to industry is not so easily shrugged off. The Select Committee had said that industry should do something about offering attractive salaries and moving qualified personnel in to senior management with the ease that it is done in Germany, France and the United States or by their British contemporaries who are lawyers or accountants. A good generalised knockabout, but the British Association report puts it in much clearer perspective. It is fairly widely known that on an international comparison, British median salaries are low at the shop floor level and get relatively lower the more responsibility is

assumed. A new survey, released in part to the British Association, looks at the way that even these inferior salaries discriminate against the scientist and engineer in productive industry. Median figures (for October 1975) for about 22,000 professionals show that at all ages accountants and lawyers get paid the most, engineers and scientists the least. Even at 25 the accountants and lawyers are £1,000 ahead; by 40 their median is £9,500, that of arts graduates £8,500, that of scientists £7,500 whilst engineers are commanding a mere £6,600.

Maybe the average non-scientist in industry really is much smarter and earns his or her differential, but no-one yet seems to have said so explicitly. More likely the growing differential reflects the expanding opportunities open to the non-scientists as time goes on. More opportunities mean more rounded employees, soon to be fit for even more opportunities. Less opportunities mean more type-casting as narrow minded characters fit only for the backroom and the sales department.

The matter is not so easily laid only at industry's door, however. The government itself employs tens of thousands of qualified scientists and engineers. Their upward path until the age of 40 is fairly well-defined and somewhat better paid than in industry. But thereafter, stagnation. Ten years ago the Fulton report on the Civil Service, recognising the problem, proposed an 'open' structure at the top of the service to encourage some cross movement among real high fliers. In practice this has meant little. Certainly laboratory directors are at least nominally in the open structure, but when one asks about other scientists and engineers who have made the move into more general high level management, the same name or two keep cropping up. Whether the waste of intelligent human resources would be ameliorated by extending the open structure further down the service or by making it easier for the frustrated to retire earlier, who knows? But at the moment the government is in no strong position to commend industry to take more scientists and engineers into senior management when it shows so little inclination to do so itself. □