

nature

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Facing up to demography

THE United States is gradually, if painfully, coming to grips with the problems of discrimination within its society. Most liberal-minded people have gone along with much that has been done in the past fifteen years, even when initial efforts to reduce discrimination have not been sophisticated or quick-footed enough to avoid charges of reverse discrimination, as in the case of Allan Bakke, a white student with good grades excluded from the medical school of the University of California at Davis. Racial minorities, women, the handicapped—these are causes with which very few would disagree. But scientists, in particular, are having very mixed feelings about the plight of those most recently claimed to be discriminated against—the elderly.

A bill that has just passed through the US House of Representatives with negligible opposition would prohibit mandatory retirement in private employment before the age of 70, and would prohibit mandatory retirement in the federal sector at any age (with exceptions such as the police and firefighters). At present private employers may retire their staff at 65, the federal government at 70. These moves came about for two reasons, both connected with demographic changes which are progressively peopling the United States with older citizens (23 million are 65 or over at present, and 31 million are expected to be so by the end of the century). First, the burden of social security payments is going up, yet the numbers of new workers is going down as the birthrate declines, so there are good actuarial reasons for wishing to postpone retirement. Second, the elderly are rapidly becoming a potent political force, of which politicians are becoming increasingly aware.

The bind for scientists is this: that deep concern was already being expressed before the retirement bill ever surfaced over the way that university faculty employment was moving towards a crisis. In 1979 there will be 4.3 million American eighteen-year-olds, 60% more than in 1960. The course of university expansion in the 1960s ensured that these young people would be well catered for. But after 1979, the numbers will steadily decline until in 1990 there will be fewer than 3.5 million in this age bracket. Many universities will presumably have to go out of business and elsewhere faculty will have to be trimmed. Things look particu-

larly bad in the physical sciences; an NSF projection puts the number of faculty positions in 1985 at 25% less than the number in 1972. Nor can this attrition be taken care of solely by retirement. Vigorous recruitment over the past thirty years has ensured that there is a predominance of young to middle-aged faculty members at present. So the prospects for the post-doctoral worker looking to get a toehold on the academic ladder already seemed bleaker than ever before. Nor should the position of the scientist working for the government be reckoned to be very different. Federal agencies have often followed very similar employment policies to those of the universities.

The new retirement legislation would obviously compound these problems very seriously, so it is small wonder that academic employers have been lobbying hard for exemption this past week. They have so far met with some success in that the Senate Human Resources Committee, in endorsing the bill (which now goes to the Senate), has excluded universities from its provisions. But no one seems yet to have spoken up for the federal government laboratories, where scientists will, presumably, be able to go on working to any age they choose.

Even if universities do emerge from the legislation relatively unscathed, there will still remain the urgent question of diminishing job prospects for the young. Richard Atkinson, Director of NSF, has recently made some fairly radical proposals (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 March). These are that the government should facilitate more mid-career shifts for those who wish to depart early; that research institutes should be established close to or within universities to which senior academics could move, devoting more of their time to research and passing their teaching load on to newly employed junior faculty; and that industry should take greater advantage of the basic-research skills of senior academic scientists in some form of joint venture.

All of these proposals are doubtless open to many and varied criticism, but we simply cannot afford the luxury of a lengthy and hair-splitting debate on the subject. Action is needed in the very near future, otherwise demography will be upon us and we will be responding to the crisis in an arbitrary way. That would lead to an even worse form of discrimination. □