

Converting intelligence into wisdom

DOES Britain use its intellectual resources wisely? There can be little doubt that the British education system has proved itself competent in the past at identifying and nourishing the high flier, from primary school through to university. Even in this time of egalitarianism there still seems a recognition of the need to sustain the outstanding student who may contribute something of exceptional value to society in the future. Twenty years of education can turn out people whose intellectual skills have been polished and sharpened to a high degree. But do we provide the right environment, as a nation, to capitalise for the next forty years on these skills; not just for the benefit of an organisation but also so that the individual may continue to feel a sense of fulfilment from being intellectually extended?

There is a trivial sense in which every educational system is immensely wasteful, and must be so to be effective. The vast majority of what is learnt in school or university is never specifically going to be used later in life but can only at best be described as intellectual compost—material which helps to explain 'the way things are' and which may illuminate future thinking in an undefinable way. But there is a far less trivial, and far more nation-specific way in which intellectual resources may be used or squandered. If the structure of a society is so heavily compartmentalised that the only way ahead is to become a specialist, and progressively to acquire greater expertise in a narrower discipline, then there is a small chance that intelligence will lead to wisdom. If there is an element of cross-movement open, at all levels, there is at least the possibility that every year will bring sounder judgement and more job-satisfaction.

Britain is indubitably a compartmentalised society: civil servants, academics, lawyers, doctors, politicians, industrialists and many others—they all pursue their own separate and highly specialised paths, defending themselves against outsiders and looking askance on those few who choose to step off a well-defined ladder.

The civil service is as good, or bad, an example as any. Competition for entry into the service is fierce; very intelligent people enter the service in their twenties. Whatever the label they carry—administrative, scientific and so on—they can be reasonably sure of a lifetime of employment, and indeed very few ever think of changing career. Certainly during that lifetime for many there will be varied work to do, but it will all be within the framework of serving the state. Even

within this, the largest compartment of them all, there are any number of sub-compartments. A scientist who, at the age of 40, feels he has run out of steam is not going to find the administrative or executive branches waiting with open arms for him, regardless of the undoubted variety of experience he might bring to a new job. Not, it must be admitted, that civil servants show all that much interest in changing their environment; a recent scheme to encourage temporary moves between the service and industry and academe, after two or three years of very modest success, is now in abeyance.

Because the civil service has built up great bodies of specialist expertise (some excellent, some not) within its walls, it feels relatively little need to share its problems with others or to draw in the outsider for a period to give a new perspective. This then leaves academics, for instance, ill-informed on many questions of broad national or international interest and inclined to withdraw even further into their laboratories, common rooms and learned societies. Not of course, that academics can be depicted as entirely innocent of their own compartmentalisations, both to keep the outside world at bay and to maintain fine distinctions between disciplines.

The end result of all this is by no means that Britain lacks experts in almost every subject under the sun, but that broader perception is often lacking. And surely scientists, as well as anyone, know how important a multidisciplinary approach is in the advancement of knowledge and understanding.

Of course, mobility must not be preached for its own sake. There are many who are at their happiest and most productive when pursuing their own specialisation, and these would profit little, and be much irritated by an ethos in which they were viewed with suspicion for sticking to what they do most effectively. On the other hand there are equally many who would profit greatly from the chance to diversify their career.

No single grand gesture will shake Britain out of its present over-specialised character. Rather a variety of smaller things have to be done: attitudes must change, terms of employment must be revised, even the penalty that the mobile suffer in their pension must be looked at. And there certainly ought to be more serious discussions about developing new institutions which could effectively span the public and private sector, looking at major policy problems but from an outsider's point of view. □