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## Time for a policy on scientists' jobs

SHIRLEY Williams, when she was Secretary of State for Education and Science, was apt to complain that there was no vocal lobby for science, although there was for everything else from aardvarks to zither players. Well, that is about to be rectified when next Tuesday representatives of the Association for Researchers in Medical Science (ARMS) lobby the House of Commons about increasing unemployment among scientists.

Anne Simmonds, the convenor of ARMS, in an interview this week (p7) explains that she herself never expected to be redundant when she set up the organisation; she is a widely respected biochemist whose case underlines the difficulties and inconsistencies of assuming that in a time of cuts the "truly able" (in the words of the Medical Research Council) will find appropriate scientific employment. Moreover, it is misleading for the MRC to claim, as one official told *Nature*, that short term contract workers "are not geniuses". While this is no doubt the case (for most), it draws attention from another unpalatable but undeniable fact that many of the tenured positions filled during the boom years of the late fifties and early sixties are occupied by people less able than many in the queue behind them.

But this is merely to pose the problem: a policy of the "truly able" is one which fudges the figures to match the facts; the number of "truly able" is by definition the number who get jobs; the argument is circular and it is no policy at all.

What is needed, and urgently, is some hard thinking about the nature of scientific careers and what government can do to make proper use of this absolutely central innovative resource. It is utter folly for a government bent on establishing economic recovery to waste its scientific resources — its scientists — through a *laissez faire* policy which both wrecks individual careers and discourages

those rising on the ladder. The Science Research Council, which is responsible for most basic research in the UK, has some forward looking policies, particularly on the relation of science to industry, which must be encouraged; and the Medical Research Council which appears to be relatively backward in this regard would do well to follow suit. But some central government initiatives are required to coordinate these efforts within a broad demographic policy for science and engineering. Here is a case where science is too important to be left to the scientists, a case where the Prime Minister should exercise her stated aim of coordinating science policy where that is necessary (see *Nature* 27 September p249).

One particular matter to which she might pay attention is the role of research students, which is the engine of production of the "excess" of short-term contract workers. The pattern of using these students as a form of cheap labour for adding to a researcher's list of publications arose during the expansion of the universities, when it was virtually guaranteed that this apprenticeship would lead to a university position. This pattern continues, although the job at the end is no longer there. Breaking the pattern by greater selectivity in appointments to studentships (perhaps by examination) carries with it the further problem of what substitute technical assistance can be provided for existing researchers, and at what cost; and how to place those graduates who would at present go on to research. But this would bring the 'jobs problem' in a scientific career back to the age of 21, where it is considerably more tractable than at 24 after a PhD, or even 30 and beyond after a series of short-term contracts. We recommend to you, Prime Minister, that you ponder these matters, to the benefit not only of science, but also of the British economy. □

## Soviet germ disaster shock?

SPECULATIONS on possible Soviet research into bacteriological and chemical weapons were revived this week by *Now!*, Britain's recently-founded answer to *Newsweek*. A two-page article, entitled "The Great Russian Germ War Disaster", gives a circumstantial account of an accident at a factory in Novosibirsk, last June, shortly after which, persons living in the vicinity "started to go down with a mysterious illness". "Thousands" of people, it is said, were affected, with the death rate among the victims "very high". The bodies of those who succumbed, it is reported, were delivered to the relatives in "sealed coffins". When a few relatives succeeded in examining the bodies, they were found to be covered in "brown patches".

The story, *Now!* makes clear, was nowhere reported in the Soviet press, but was transmitted to *Now!* by a "traveller". It should be recalled, however, that except for international air-crashes or accidents involving foreigners, it is very rare for the Soviet press to report accidents. Certainly, to judge from the *Now!* reports, something untoward happened in the Novosibirsk factory — but the account, as *Now!* itself admits, is consonant with a Séveso-type chemical disaster, which need not necessarily have any connection with the military at all. The allegation of

bacteriological warfare seems to be based on the fact that a molecular biology institute was established at Novosibirsk some three years ago.

Certainly, the now famous Kyshtym nuclear devastation of 1958 is a constant reminder that the Soviet Union has the logistic capacity to mount a major cover-up operation, even to the extent of evacuating large tracts of country. Moreover, in conditions of a controlled press, even the most innocent natural disaster is liable to generate wild rumours. (Last winter's explosion, which wrecked the Rotunda building in Warsaw, was attributed, in popular belief, to a bomb planted by the authorities . . . so that the dissident "Committee for Social Self-Defence" issued an appeal to the government to allay panic by publishing the result of the commissions of enquiry).

The official Soviet News Agency TASS always vehemently denies any rumours of bacteriological weapons research. Nevertheless, if what happened at Novosibirsk had no military applications, it is perhaps unfortunate that, immediately following the *Now!* allegations, the Soviet press attache in London was away on sick leave, leaving no deputy empowered to comment. □