

## Japanese legislative logjam

# Educational reform held up

Tokyo

PRIME Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone has run into unexpectedly fierce opposition to his plans to set up a special commission to reform Japan's educational system. To push the necessary bill through the Diet, together with the bill for "privatizing" Japan's telecommunications monopoly (see *Nature* 308, 678 and 763; 1984) and some other controversial bills, Nakasone resorted in mid-May to an extension of the 150-day Diet session by a further 77 days. But opposition parties immediately responded with a boycott of Diet proceedings that lasted until mid-June. Debate has only just begun again, and it is still uncertain whether it will be possible to get the bills passed in the extended Diet session.

Moves to reform the educational system — particularly to prevent the university entrance examination hell — are certainly popular enough among the general public and Diet members. They jibe only at Nakasone's insistence that it should contain only members appointed by him without the need for Diet approval ("to ensure neutrality"), that it should carry out its deliberations in private ("to avoid outside pressure") and should report directly to himself rather than to the Diet. Under these conditions, the major opposition party, the Japan Socialist Party, believes that the commission will simply be a rubber stamp for Nakasone's personal views on educational reform.

For the universities, Nakasone's ideas of reform are likely to centre on lessening the importance of the entrance examination. At present, university entrance is simply determined by total test scores in school-leaving examinations. Once entry has been won, very little further is expected of students — giving rise to the view of university as a "leisure land".

Nakasone's opinion, as spelled out in his book *A new theory of conservatism*, is that this should be reversed and that universities should be "easy to enter but difficult to graduate from". He also believes that the university system should be far more flexible, for example by allowing students to transfer credits from one university to another — a move that might well help to break down the overwhelming advantage that Tokyo University graduates have in finding jobs. The problem is that much of Nakasone's plea for more "choice" seems to rely on there being more private education, both at school and university levels; but private universities, according to their own just-released white paper, already see difficulties ahead.

With more than a third of all high-school students now going on to higher education, the number of undergraduates will increase massively between 1986 and 1992 when the second "baby boom generation" leaves school. But after that, university entrants

will decline sharply. The private universities point out that they need government support if they are to expand for a six-year period to take the extra students and then contract again. At present, the only way they would be able to cope with extra student numbers is by reducing the quality of education. Nakasone's reforms are thus becoming entangled with the level of state support — now declining — for private universities. As it is believed that Nakasone wants to appoint the present head of the private Universities Federation to leadership of the reform commission, the state universities believe that the whole reform plan might end up robbing them of funds.

The most vociferous opposition to the establishment of the commission has come, however, from the school-teachers' union *Nikkyoso*. The union claims a membership of 71 per cent of the primary and junior high-school teachers (though the Ministry of Education says the real figure is 51 per cent) and is left-wing in its views. At its annual convention last week — which required the presence of 2,500 riot police to prevent disruption by right-wing extremists as in the past two years — it decided to have nothing at all to do with the commission. Nakasone had been hoping that he could win support by having a *Nikkyoso* representative on the commission.

The union is naturally worried by the emphasis Nakasone places on "moral education". In March for example, he said in the Diet that "patriotism and the traditional Japanese respect for one's parents should be taught at school". To the left wing this seems too much like a return to the nationalist education that existed before the Second World War, and its members claim that signs of a swing to the right can be seen already.

The contents of school textbooks seem to be being more tightly controlled this year and the Ministry of Education has been accused of using its powers to dilute the facts of the darker side of Japanese history.

For Nakasone, much more rests on the successful passage of the bill than his own personal interest in educational reform. In November, he has to face the bi-annual elections for the Liberal Democratic Party leadership, success in which assures that he continues as prime minister. Despite his popularity abroad and his emergence as Japan's first international statesman, his performance at home has been lacklustre. He will be judged by his fellow party members mainly by his ability to handle the Diet, but in this session he has failed to get a single major bill through (although a measure to increase Diet members' salaries passed with great speed). As well as the educational and telecommunications bills, bills to reform the health system and the electoral system are waiting.

Alun Anderson

## Tibetan geology

# UK-Chinese joint venture

A COLLABORATIVE research project on the geology of the Tibetan Plateau has been announced by the Royal Society of London and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It will run for two years from 1 July, with the actual fieldwork taking place in the summer of 1985. Fourteen Chinese scientists and twelve from the West (largely from the United Kingdom), under the leadership of Professors Chang Cheng-Fa, R.M. Shackleton and J.F. Dewey, will spend eight weeks covering more than 1,000 km in perhaps the most inaccessible part of the world. The estimated cost of approximately £350,000 is being shared roughly equally between the two academies, with the Chinese providing the back-up for the expedition.

Scientifically, the project is complementary to the joint French-Chinese investigations in southern Tibet in 1980-83, as a result of which earth scientists now have a better understanding of the mechanisms of formation of the Himalayas and other linear mountain belts. In contrast, the means by which vast areas of relatively undeformed rocks can be uplifted (to an average elevation of 5 km in the case of the Tibetan Plateau) are still obscure, in spite of theories based largely on consideration of the rheology of the Earth's crust. The Anglo-Chinese project should provide the hard facts against which these theories can be tested.

The project involves a 1,000-km traverse from Lhasa to Golmud, on the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Geologically, Lhasa sits on a block representing the southernmost part of Asia, at the junction with the Indian block to the south. North of the Lhasa block, the geology is poorly known, although a number of crustal units have been recognized. Only painstaking fieldwork, building on the reconnaissance surveys of the host nation, will clarify the relationship between these units.

The major results of the French-Chinese work relate to the past 20 million years, although reports of the second expedition in 1981 (see *Nature* 307, 17-36; 1984) suggested that Tibet may consist of pieces broken off Gondwanaland, which moved north in advance of India, perhaps in successive waves, and eventually collided with Eurasia. The British aim to delve deeper into the past, using predominantly palaeomagnetic and faunal studies, to the earliest separation 150 million years ago in the late Jurassic. The detailed histories of these continental fragments may be better known as a result of the new project.

Negotiations started in 1981 and the programme is regarded as a landmark in the continuing expansion of collaborative programmes between the Royal Society and the Chinese Academy. Peter Gambles