

Nature's new venture in Japan

Nature will now be printed in Japan as well as in Britain and the United States. One objective is to give readers a better service. Another is to draw the scientific community of Japan more into the general swim.

ANY international publisher will say it is ridiculous that a journal with a tiny circulation (just over 34,000 at the end of May, probably 1,000 greater by now) should ape the *Times* and *Newsweeks* of this world by printing replicas of itself in Japan. Are not two printing centres already a sufficient headache for such an esoteric publication, especially when most other science journals appear content with only one? That is what the sober-sides will say. *Nature* has rejected that opinion on the simple grounds that a journal with international pretensions cannot entrust the timeliness of its distribution around the world to the habits of local postal services here and there. Journal publication is a socially valuable activity when it gives readers the sense of community that springs from knowing that the same information is more or less simultaneously available, and is thus diminished by delay. *Nature* intends that it should be delivered to addresses in Japan within a few days of its formal publication in London and that its cost to private Japanese subscribers shall be enormously reduced, by something like 60 per cent.

Many also know that Japan is the cockpit of social and industrial change in East Asia, itself probably next century's powerhouse. *Nature's* concern to be quickly available in Tokyo must therefore be recognized as being alloyed with considerations of where its future lies.

Does that mean that *Nature* now believes that the future of fundamental science is in the hands of a people so willing to impoverish its academics as to make Mrs Thatcher's British academic dependants seem like princes, so able to educate its young that most of them are literate in the world's most difficult language and knowledgeable in other things as well, yet so eager for the quick buck that their licensed companies will sell off allies' military secrets without thinking twice (last week's Toshiba scandal refers)? It would, of course, be foolish to attempt to guess which centres will emerge as the most productive sources of innovation. Most probably the pattern of scientific work will be more widely distributed, and more dependent on international collaboration, than in the recent past.

But the Japanese people, who have made distinguished contributions to fundamental science over the past half-century, are now sufficiently challenged by the probably mistaken self-diagnosis of themselves as being strong on ingenuity but short on creativity as to wish to change that state of affairs. There are many who will laugh at the idea that the world's most successful industrial power should be cudgelling its brains to find ways of being more creative. It will nevertheless be a great surprise if Japan has not so successfully built on its quickly growing roster of excellent research centres that it soon becomes as powerful in basic science as it is already in the application of science.

The Japanese government's enthusiasm, at least until a few months ago, for its Human Frontiers programme (see page 100) is one index of its eagerness to find new ways of doing scientific business. Critics of the project will say that the project is a recipe for making vagueness respectable, but that is to mistake what Japan has been attempting. The objective has been to see whether new technology will spring from biology in the century ahead, as it has sprung from physical science in the century past. The government has gone trawling for ideas internationally, no

doubt hoping that these consultations would also engender enthusiasm among potential partners in time for that to have been reflected in last month's economic summit meeting at Venice. That calculation has been disappointed, partly because Japan neglected to play the old game of putting money on the table. But the project, it must be hoped, is not yet dead. Putative partners in the West should use this opportunity to discover what Japan is looking for, lest the opportunity should be foreclosed. *Nature* will do more to find out, and will report.

Meanwhile, there are more immediate considerations that will ensure that printing *Nature* in Japan will be entertaining and rewarding not merely for *Nature* and its Japanese readers but for people elsewhere. One hope is that, by means of a stronger presence of *Nature* in Japan, Japanese researchers will more readily overcome their diffidence at publishing in the international literature. Another is that Japan will be a conduit to and for other parts of east Asia, China in particular. Meanwhile, it should be made widely known that, in making arrangements to print in Japan, *Nature* has encountered none of the legendary non-tariff barriers to trade by means of which Japan is said to keep itself to itself. (It may have helped incalculably that, in this enterprise, *Nature* has had the assistance of its owners, the international publishing group Macmillan, which is particularly strong in what Occidentals still perversely call the Far East.) But the Japanese people concerned have been, as always, hospitable, helpful and exceedingly efficient. What else does one now expect? □

Going back to GO

The plight of the Geological Survey shows what is wrong with British research administration.

ONCE upon a time (in 1835), there sprang into being a happy and productive research organization, called the Geological Survey (later rechristened the Geological Survey of Great Britain and Ireland, afterwards of the United Kingdom), that sent men and women also into the field with hammers, and which produced delicately coloured maps that were nevertheless of great utility. Productive contentment reigned until the early 1960s, when the Geological Survey had the misfortune to fall upon good times: it was rechristened yet again as the Institute of Geological Sciences, and its staff was multiplied threefold. Its then director, Sir Kingsley Dunham, an unreflective man so powerful that he could not suffer even the wise gladly, malignly enjoyed being the tail that wagged the dog of the then newly created Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). Then, after Dunham's time, NERC had its own back, saying that survey work would have to be paid for by those who found it useful. The Butler committee which has been brooding about the condition of the British Geological Survey (see page 102) now recommends going back to GO. It is right to do so. Even well-worked countries such as Britain need geological survey organizations. The pity is that so much blood has been spilled in reaching this conclusion. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, will be furious if she gets to know what has been going on. □