

last two years of secondary schooling have been a kind of rehearsal of undergraduate studies. Until quite recently, it has been the custom for university departments to make success in specified A-level subjects a necessary (but not necessarily a sufficient) condition of entry.

The consequences of this system have done as much to undermine the quality of British education as any shortage of funds externally imposed, but are only now being generally recognized. Almost all young people have been educated narrowly, however closely their schools have been able to simulate higher education. By being required to "choose" their "subjects" before they can form a judgement of the kinds of skills they will need to acquire, most young people in Britain have also been turned into suspected misfits; having settled for "science" or something else, they are constantly looking over their intellectual shoulders in ignorance of what they never studied, wondering whether their choice was wise. The damage done to those who are blinkered in this way, but who then never go on to higher education, is almost unthinkable. But there is also ample evidence that the system has robbed the scientific professions of able people; given the endemic relative shortage of gifted science teachers in British schools, it is inevitable that other disciplines should have won an unduly high proportion of susceptible young hearts and minds.

Only in the past few years has it been generally recognised in Britain that this system must change. One of the few virtues of the government's Education Reform Bill is that there will in future be a national curriculum (up to the age of sixteen) legislating for some kind of balance in the education of the young. The Secretary of State for Education and Science, Mr Kenneth Baker, is also firmly backing a new system of school-leaving examinations in which intending entrants to higher education will ordinarily follow five (rather than three) courses, not all of them of equal weight or in the same direction.

Not everybody is happy. One of Baker's advisory committees, charged with defining the ideal pattern and preferring six courses of equal weight, has been rebuffed on the good grounds that the new system will be a going concern in the next academic year. What tends to be forgotten, in this confused tale, is that the system about to be introduced (and for which students are already following new courses) is essentially that rejected hotly by British universities just over twenty years ago. It is forgivable that Baker may seem to have lost patience with some of his constituents.

That does not imply that the new regime will be markedly better than the old. Indeed, in many ways it will perpetuate some of the worst features of British academic life, among which one of the most corrosive is the snobbery of those whose academic pretensions are required. The new examinations scheme also takes far too little account of how circumstances have changed during the two decades since it was originally (but abortively) designed. Despite recent cuts, the participation rate in higher education has now grown to 15 per cent, while many of the institutions providing this service find themselves threatened with externally enforced change.

Some institutions still boasting of their research are clearly destined to become largely teaching institutions. What reason can there be to hope that the same system of school-leaving examinations can serve as a basis (by defining necessary but insufficient conditions) for entry to the variety of higher education institutions now belatedly emerging in Britain? And will there not, in the new system, be even more substance in the old academic complaint that students reaching university less well drilled in what they will be studying cannot gain a first degree in just three years?

The simple way of dealing with this and other conundrums is to put back the clock to the time when the 16-plus examination, which will in future be a certificate of general education, was the necessary condition for entry into higher education, leaving it to universities and polytechnics separately to develop other criteria

for selecting those whom they would teach. Some universities would no doubt wish to follow the University of Keele in legislating for a four-year degree course for everybody, in which case the government should encourage them in that direction. Interestingly, others might wish to experiment with captive secondary schools as complements to the public education service. Sadly, while the British government seems willing to try out all kinds of schemes for giving schools greater autonomy, its face is set as hard as ever against such a measure of autonomy for higher education institutions, without which the benefits of the diversity now emerging will not materialize. □

## Pity poor Texaco?

*Proverbs such as "It never rains, but it pours!" apply to the world's unluckiest oil company.*

ONLY a few months ago, the US oil company Texaco was in the doghouse of the international oil business for having sought the protection of the US bankruptcy laws from a court judgement requiring a penalty of more than \$11,000 million (including interest). The origins of the dispute, going back to the early 1970s, are now irrelevant, but turned on a dispute between Texaco and a much smaller oil company called Penzoil over the means by which Texaco acquired valuable oil leases from a third company, Getty Oil.

During the protracted civil suit fought between Texaco and Penzoil, it seems not to have been disputed that Getty had first agreed to sell the disputed leases to Penzoil, but that Texaco eventually bought them for a higher price; the issue was whether Texaco had secured its purchase unfairly. The Texas courts eventually decided in favour of Penzoil, awarding compensation for the present value of past income stretching back over a decade and a half. To have paid up would have been to bankrupt: why not instead volunteer for bankruptcy instead, securing a moratorium from creditors which looking for a settlement. By the end of last year, having persuaded Penzoil that it is no easier to get water out of crushed stone than the integral variety, Texaco was let off with damages roughly a fifth of those originally awarded (by ordinary standards, far from chicken-feed) and seemed ready to face an unencumbered if leaner future.

It could hardly have been more wrong. From the outset, Texaco has featured prominently on the juicier pages of the US financial press. An immediate difficulty was the discovery that Mr Carl Icahn, most often described as a "corporate raider" but who happens also to have become chairman of Transworld Airlines after a stock-market tussle, had acquired 15 per cent of the company's shares. Another was that Mr Icahn proposed to buy the remaining shares at \$60 each, rather more than their present price of \$51 each. Last Friday, at a meeting of the company in Texas, votes were cast for and against Mr Icahn's proposal that four of his nominees should be elected to the company board. Meanwhile, Texaco seeks to make itself less vulnerable by selling assets — its Canadian subsidiary is on the block, while a distribution network in the United States is likely to be partly sold to Saudi Arabia.

Opinions differ on whether there is a moral in all this, unless it is the banal observation that companies are no less vulnerable than private persons if they find themselves at the wrong end of a court judgement. But if the judgement against Texaco was correctly argued, this train of events extends to companies the kind of good-neighbour view of life that people expect of other people. This, it will be recalled, is what happened to the Manville asbestos company and to the manufacturers of the "Dalkon shield" — an intrauterine contraceptive device, each of which faced overburdening product liability damages. At least in the United States, the courts expect of companies not only personal rectitude but remarkable farsightedness in anticipating dangers that might arise from their work. Do companies yet appreciate their difficulty? □