

Japan asks for more

University chemists in Japan want more money. They might have asked for even more.

Is the chronically parlous condition of Japanese universities an anachronism or part of the foundation of Japan's economic success? That is a question on many Western politicians' minds since the 1960s, when the helplessness of Japanese academics in the face of scarce support was accidentally drawn to wider attention by the student troubles of the times; some politicians, as British academics know too well, have responded as if they had discovered in Japan a way of making academic scientists productive: make university life so uncomfortable that they prefer to work in industry.

To be fair, the scene is not uniform. While most university departments and the professorial research teams inhabiting them are badly housed and equipped, some are quite the opposite — often because of a senior person's links with industry through formal contracts (from the revenues of which the university, as with grants from government sources, usually takes a share). It is as serious that the assistants attached to a productive professor, essentially his postdoctoral helpers, may languish in that state for years, badly paid and demoralized by the need to wait for dead men's shoes to become vacant. Yet so rigid are the rules that some able people shoulder two parallel teaching loads to acquire extra help.

The most striking feature of the report on page 197 of conditions in chemistry departments in Japanese universities is its source — not a committee appointed by a government agency seeking to sustain a predetermined policy, but the independent Chemical Society of Japan, which has taken care to poll university chemistry departments throughout the country before giving its opinions of what should now be done. The bill that the society would like the government to pick up is substantial but in no sense outrageous. Perhaps nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) machines have been used too readily as a yardstick for comparison and a justification for the appearance of the begging-bowls, but they are, as the world knows, literally indispensable means of characterizing compounds, new or old.

Whether the Japanese government will respond as the chemists would wish is another matter. Chemists are not the only paupers on the scene, for one thing. And the government will say, as on previous occasions, that it has no money, which is also true. (The Japanese budget deficit is larger, as a proportion of GNP, than that of the United States, but its economic consequences are unimportant because it is financed, at low rates of interest, by Japanese citizens saving for their retirement, which comes early.) What it should appreciate is that sooner or later it will have to find some, if only to hide its shame. Meanwhile, academics might prod the government (and some of their colleagues) towards a more enlightened organization for the public universities as a whole.

The *koza* system, for example, needs urgently to be reformed. While many of these teaching and research teams are excellent means of training graduate students, others are but little empires in which able people lose enthusiasm and drive. A looser structure could benefit from a more generous system of competitive grants, and is almost a precondition for its success.

The management of the large national universities also cries out for change. As often elsewhere, the administration is powerful, but not often as remote as in it can be at some Japanese universities. But the greatest need of all is that there should be a simpler way in which the Japanese contribution to science can be more smoothly made a part of what is happening elsewhere, not simply in the West but in Asia. That, of course, is a tall order: a few NMR machines will be easier to find.

None of this implies that Japan is indifferent to the problem of its downtrodden academic community. During the past decade

in particular, there has been a commendable effort to provide national facilities accessible to all, while national laboratories such as those at Okazaki carry the traditions of basic research into a novel and well-heeled environment. But these developments are not a substitute for enabling academic scientists to pursue research effectively in their own laboratories, and in a way that helps to provide their own students with the stimulation that is just as necessary in Japan as elsewhere. And what the chemists are now saying might just as easily have been said by people from other disciplines. □

Not by appointment

British architects are in the pillory again, but the real villains go scot-free.

PRINCE Charles, who turned forty this week, and who may yet be the King of England (or, strictly, of the United Kingdom), has so offended modern British architects with his complaints about the buildings they design that the profession may neglect the lessons it should be learning, and which are not those apparently on offer. The row has been simmering ever since he called one intended building a "carbuncle". Now, in 75 minutes of near prime-time television, he has laid about the architects with even greater vigour; one building (still a plan) he likened to a "thirties wireless" (otherwise "radio receiver"). The charge is that British architects scorn the people who will live or work in them, and that they have designed monstrosities on the successive tides of changing fashion without consideration for the built environment of the sites falling into their clutches. To a very large extent, the complaint is accurate, but it is a pity that architects are to shoulder the whole blame.

Societies get the buildings they deserve both morally and in the literal sense that they commission architects and eventually pay for what is built. For some considerable time, British clients (even when spending public money) have lacked the qualities that would allow them to discharge their parts in their implicit compacts with their architects. A sense of good aesthetic taste, valuable though that may be because it is so often wanting, may be less important than their lack of clarity on the question of how they wish to live and work. How else does it come about that the most common complaint against British architects is that they are forever "playing God" with other people's lives? Clients with an inkling of what they wanted would hardly let that happen to them on such an important matter.

British clients are also scandalously money-conscious. They expect that their architects will not merely ensure that the plumbing is silent but that the buildings they eventually own will be recognized as works of art by others even if they are themselves uninterested, but expect this to be done on a percentage fee. But clients (or their bankers) do have strong views on critical parameters of building design that might affect the commercial values. Influenced, no doubt, by knowing that many sixteenth-century buildings are still used, every client sees his investment as a permanency — and is abetted by planners with regulatory authority who will not easily allow buildings, however ill-distinguished, to be replaced by others.

Prince Charles, regrettably, may have helped confirm potential clients in their cowardice. It is one thing to be ridiculed by friends and acquaintances, but quite another to risk being told off by a monarch in waiting. So there will now be a temptation for clients to be even more cautious and for architects to grope towards a rose-cottaged style they hope may win a plug on some future television programme. But the plain truth is that there is no such thing as a characteristic contemporary style, the post-modernists notwithstanding. Most architectural traditions, and the British in particular, are more in need of experiment and the diversity it brings than of a new orthodoxy. That is why Prince Charles has exerted his influence in the wrong direction. □