should be widely regarded as what it is — a first approximation to a workable carbon tax of a kind that will probably be needed one day. Di Meana should be remembered with honour for that. □

Realities behind riots

Blacks are underrepresented among graduate students in the United States. Why should this be?

IN the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, there has understandably been hand-wringing and introspection about inner cities in the United States. Predictably, there has also been a rash of opinion polls and statistical collations attempting to sum up or point to solutions for these difficult problems — often in the form of over-simple pie charts and histograms. Two such exercises, in particular, stand out because of their common thread — the education and training of black Americans. Thus a *New York Times*/CBS News poll has found that 78 per cent of respondents agree that more jobs and job training would "help a lot to reduce racial tension and prevent riots".

An admirable goal, nobody would deny, but how likely is it ever to be attained? Hard statistics from the US National Research Council, just published, show that black Americans have a hard time in graduate schools. Among black US doctoral candidates, 63 per cent have to support themselves financially, whereas 69 per cent of graduate students from outside the United States are given research or teaching assistantships (a higher percentage, incidentally, than that for all US candidates, 42 per cent). Such arrangements, some say, ensure that black students are put off graduate studies even before they reach for the application forms. The comparison, of course, is not entirely fair. Foreign students, for example, are more likely to be found in scientific disciplines whereas black Americans favour liberal arts, which are relatively poorly provided with research grants from which to pay graduate students.

Even so, the fact remains that little more than two per cent of PhDs awarded in 1990 went to black Americans and in some subjects — conspicuously molecular biology and applied mathematics — no black student was awarded a doctorate that year. Even in a subject such as education, the proportion of blacks being supported was much smaller than the proportion of foreign students. Any attempt to divine the underlying reasons soon runs into the quicksands of subjectivity and racial prejudice, encapsulated as "the irrational fear of black men on the part of those in charge of graduate programs" and "the unnerving image of aggressive black males in the laboratories".

What is to be done? Have two decades of positive efforts to end discrimination failed to exorcise these prejudices? Should not the clearly increasing interest of social scientists in the image projected by young black men (in particular), and the misreading of that image that is all too common, be channelled into studies of what goes on in the admissions departments on their own doorsteps? While waiting for public high-school education to be put to rights, making sure that qualified black students make the most of what educational opportunities there are would be a prudent stop-gap. □

DNA feud

Apparently the US EPA cannot agree with other agencies on the regualtory status of recombinant DNA.

A CONSENSUS has been reached in the scientific community generally that safety concerns about agents produced with recombinant DNA technology should be directed to the characteristics of the recombinant DNA agent in question rather than to the process by which it is made. Even the White House says it agrees (see *Nature* **349**, 726; 1991).

Nevertheless, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) still bases regulatory decisions on process rather than product, according to a letter from a University of California (UC) scientist and EPA adviser who has challenged EPA's official statements that it is scientifically valid to regulate the process of recombinant DNA technology. Robert Burris of UC, Riverside, says he thought it was a "political decision of convenience, rather than a scientific one" to go on pretending that DNA technology is potentially hazardous in and of itself. Burris is right and EPA should see the scientific light. □

The great fungus

A killer fungus from Washington State challenges benign *Armillaria bulbosa* for the title of world's largest mushroom.

A MONTH ago, two botanists from the University of Toronto and a forester from the Michigan Technological University reported the identification of a fungus in the state of Michigan said to be among the 'largest and oldest living organisms' in the world (Smith, M. L. *et al. Nature* **356**, 428; 1992). Weighing more than 10,000 kg, and occupying a minimum of 15 hectares or 38 acres, the 1,500-year-old, genetically stable *Armillaria bulbosa* certainly sounded like a world-class giant. But now a competitor for the title has reared its nasty head.

A pathologist at the Department of Natural Resources of the State of Washington, in the northwest of the United States, says that Washington has the world's largest organism — an *Armillaria ostoyae* that covers 1,500 acres in the foothills of Mount Adams. But *A. ostoyae*, whose age is merely estimated at 400 to 1,000 years, is a youngster by comparison with *A. bulbosa*. It also sounds like a less friendly creature: *A. ostoyae* is a killer fungus that can wipe out whole populations of trees. Why Washington should be so cursed, while Michigan's fungus is benign, remains unexplained.

But that is not an end to the affair. The word is that Oregon State may also enter the competition. Who knows where it may go from there? May the best fungus win. □