

supposedly autonomous, but which depend on the government for virtually all their income.

The truth is that British academics are so grossly underpaid that the difference between 5 and 7 per cent is probably immaterial. One consequence is that internationally mobile academics can easily be poached, another is that research people working at universities, graduate students included, cannot be decently rewarded without creating intolerable anomalies, which has the effect of constraining entry into research. Yet it is many years since annual pay settlements have matched the going inflation rate. Young people embarking on academic careers are to some degree protected by the annual increments accompanying the various academic grades, but eventually they reach a plateau that sinks slowly as inflation continues.

A university system cannot soldier on like this, decade after decade, without becoming second-rate. Good people will either go elsewhere or will be so demoralized by daily hardship that they cease to be productive. To be sure, the British government has problems: it is committed to spending much more than its likely revenue, and is embarking on a sensible campaign to spend much less. In that cause, just two weeks ago it vetoed a recommendation that senior public servants' salaries should be increased by 30 per cent, holding them instead to 5 per cent (its counter-proposal for academics). But other public servants, teachers and nurses, for example, have seen their salaries this year increase by roughly 7 per cent. Why pick on academics? Is it because the students who might have supported them have dispersed for the summer? Or does the government also believe that British academics spend all summer on some beach?

The underlying issue is indeed that of who manages the universities, which is a complicated question. On academic pay, the British government does not hide its distaste for the arrangement under which salaries for academics and support staff at universities are nationally negotiated. The system has several drawbacks; successful universities cannot easily reward those to whom success is due and, more important, struggling universities cannot corporately decide to prefer pay-cuts to extinction. The trouble is that most British universities have only insignificant resources of their own, while the arrangements for meeting their running costs from public funds are still so new (and are still changing) that no university could confidently break out of the traditional system and be sure that it would not land itself in trouble in just a few years. The paradox is that the government's actions are unlikely to speed the arrival of the goal it has in mind. □

Broadcasting science

The renewal of the BBC's charter demands the intervention of others than mere broadcasters.

THE British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is not an agency of the British government as, outside Britain, it is generally misunderstood to be, but an autonomous broadcasting agency whose constitution is a distinctive means of separation from

central control. The BBC's chief source of funds is a fee paid by all who own a television receiver. The fees are thus not taxes; anybody wishing not to pay can discard his receiver. The proof of the BBC's independence is that it has repeatedly been a thorn in the flesh of governments of all colours, partly because of its satire of politicians, more seriously for its critical reporting of public affairs. But now the government has a chance to turn the tables on the BBC, whose charter (including its right to licence fees) has to be renewed in 1996. Sensibly, the minister responsible, Mr David Mellor, says there will be an outline of the government's proposals in a few weeks and then a further year for debate.

The British science lobby, such as it is, must be heard from during that period. Although, when last year's Home Secretary was waging war on pit-bull terriers, a popular Member of Parliament, Mrs Edwina Currie, told a radio audience asking about the relevance of DNA fingerprinting, "I don't think dogs have DNA", the value of broadcasting (radio and television) in making science generally understandable and understood should not be understated. Despite recent improvements in newspaper coverage of science, broadcasting can make a unique contribution, and for two reasons — partly because the audience is self-selected from among those with an interest in affairs in general, and partly because broadcasting has distinctive characteristics, notably its discursiveness, its capacity to tackle often fuzzy conceptual matters and its ability to suggest that the conversation of science is also interesting and humane.

The BBC has a good record in the field. Its regular science programme called *Horizon*, now managed in partnership with WGBH in Boston, is the most obvious feather in its cap, but there is much else besides. It is true that in the recent past the BBC has been seduced into supposing that science is coextensive with natural history, partly because of the skill of Sir David Attenborough as a presenter (narrator) and of his film crews, and partly because audiences are naturally mesmerized by the sight of great animals in the wild or of multicoloured fly-catching plants swallowing their prey. But that misjudgement, not catastrophic, seems to owe something to the BBC's competition with the 'independent' or commercial television companies for audience share.

That practice, and the principle from which it stems, will be the nub of the argument in the year ahead. Should there be a public service broadcasting organization, and should it be paid for by all who receive television signals, even when they remain tuned to other channels exclusively? One of the BBC's achievements is that of marrying the didactic with the entertaining and intellectually stimulating, which is possible only within a unified editorial framework. When commercial television was introduced in Britain in the mid-1950s, holders of the right to broadcast were also required by their regulators to follow the ethos of public service broadcasting, and did so creditably, but that has now been undermined by the doctrine that the right to broadcast goes to the highest bidder. Throwing the BBC into the same pot, as some suggest, or even requiring that it should look to sponsorship for support, would spell the end of public service broadcasting when the need of it is likely to be greater than ever. □