Letter from Westminster

Why pay comparisons do not always help

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Industrial muscle is usually provided by numbers, but in the case of top people it is the reverse. Giving them their money does not actually cost all that much. The point was clearly made by the Top Salaries Review Body (TSRB) in its recent report. It pointed out that the grades of civil servants that it deals with account for about 0.5% of the basic salary bill of the non-industrial Civil Service as a whole, or about £17m out of £3300m.

The rises proposed by the TSRB for top civil servants, senior members of the armed Forces, and the judiciary ranged on average between 19.4% and 24.3%. They were cut by the Government to on average from 14.3% to 18.6% on the grounds that having felt obliged to hold back the 3% retained in 1981 from doctors and dentists a similar abatement should also be imposed on top people. It was seen at Westminster as yet another case of "to them that hath shall be given," and unflattering comparisons with the offer to the nurses and the Health Service workers were made. But such emotive considerations apart, it really is a numbers game—total numbers.

Attrition of quality

The report's conclusion is one that many professional people with years of arduous and costly training behind them might ponder. It goes as follows. If the salaries for the highest public service jobs were allowed to deteriorate to a point at which they were seriously out of line with the responsibilities carried and the opportunities elsewhere, there would be no overnight disaster. Those concerned would not go on strike and there would be no mass exodus. Eventually, however, by process of attrition the quality of those services would suffer, to the national detriment, if the financial rewards that could be achieved by the most able were held too far below those obtainable in other walks of life. Such a penalty was no less serious for being less obvious or less immediate, and the effects might only become evident when it was already too late to apply any easy corrective.

So far as the NHS pay dispute is concerned (p 1510) there is no doubt that it has been overshadowed by the Falklands crisis and has—so far—failed to attract much public attention, a fact ministers have noted with interest. Arthur Scargill, the miners' leader, made the point at a peace meeting in the Commons that "this capitalist war" in the Falklands had clouded the issues of the day conveniently for the Government. Health ministers would deny any deliberate intent to distract attention, but it is a side effect with which they are not unhappy.

Answers for the BMA on smoking and drinking

The Annual Representative Meeting of the BMA last year passed two resolutions on smoking and alcohol abuse that urged the Government to discourage smoking by whatever means were available to it, and called for a campaign on the use and restriction of alcohol to alert the medical and related professions to the problems of alcohol abuse. That indefatigable letter writer, Dr Roger Thomas, Labour MP for Carmarthen, sent the resolutions to the health ministers for comment, and has now received from Mr Geoffrey Finsberg, under secretary for efficiency and effectiveness in the NHS, the definitive reply. It is quite clear that in both cases legislation is ruled out, though he did emphasise that ministers had not sought to obstruct backbench attempts to introduce legislation to curb cigarette advertising. That might be useful next year if someone is lucky in the ballot for private members' time, since one of the biggest hurdles is always opposition by the Government to such Bills.

Mr Finsberg said that the Government remained firmly committed to doing all it could to reduce the amount of cigarette smoking. It preferred, however, to follow the policy of successive governments in seeking to control the promotional activities of the companies by voluntary agreements, a policy, he claimed, that had led to a steady reduction in the prevalence of smoking in recent years. (Doctors might have reservations about that claim.)

Sport's sponsorship

He said that the Government accepted that sport's sponsorship might help maintain the social acceptability of smoking, but that there was no clear evidence that legislation to curb such activities would have any direct effect on cigarette consumption and so on health.

On alcohol abuse, he said that controls must be applied by individuals themselves: that was an important message to get across. Some might urge that alcohol misuse should be tackled by the Government imposing controls aimed at reducing overall levels of consumption, but it had to be recognised that sensible attitudes towards health matters, which were desirable throughout the community, could not be secured by the Government alone. The message on alcohol was not as simple as that on smoking, he added. This was because in general there was no harm in drinking in moderation and most people who did drink did so sensibly.

"As with smoking, there is no clear evidence that legislative measures to restrict advertising and sponsorship by the drinks trade would have a direct effect in reducing alcohol consumption, or more importantly in alcohol misuse, and we do not consider that legal restrictions or a ban on alcohol advertising would be justified," he added.