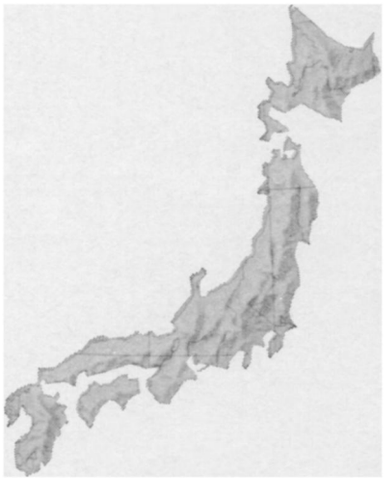
letter from Tokyo



Charter for science

Bill to push research still in trouble despite drastic revision. Social sciences out.

In the United States, the Federal Government supports 70 percent of the nation's R&D effort. Private industry handles the rest. In Japan the proportions are exactly reversed.

And despite the fact that the Japanese gross national product has doubled every eight years since 1952, and Japan is a major exporter of merchandise, there is a growing fear that Japan's lead in world markets could slip unless she becomes an exporter of technological knowhow as well.

To move Japan in this direction the Science and Technology Council, which advises the Government through its links to the prime minister's office, proposed in 1960 new laws to promote original research development. The council wants to see 2.5 percent of national income going into R&D, rather than the present 1.7 percent.

The legislative proposal has had its ups and downs; it is being introduced again this year, with better hope for passage as a result of modifying, molifying amendments to exclude university research and research in the social sciences.

The proposal now defines Government's responsibilities and policy concerning scientific and technological developments, indicates where Government should concentrate promotional efforts and calls for better salaries, working conditions and laboratory facilities for scientists and technologists. Scientists who back it warmly call it a "national scientific and technological constitution . . . our bill of rights."

The original version covered all fields of science, including the social disciplines. It came close to adoption in March 1966. But last minute objections by the education division of the Government's Liberal-Democratic Party to the inclusion of the social sciences resulted in a review of the entire measure. Consequently, those disciplines as well as university research not directly connected with what is seen as the more pressing national interest were excluded, on the grounds of economy.

The bill was redrafted as a "Basic Science and Technology Law" and given a strong official cast. This in turn sparked opposition from leading private firms, industrial research laboratories and even some quasi-government agencies. It was pigeonholed after months of debate. But the basic concept was kept alive.

Now a Liberal-Democratic Party steering committee is determined the measure should become law, to help strengthen Government's efforts to broaden and deepen scientific and technological development.

There is a feeling of urgency now that might not have been strong eight years ago.

Many scientists have taken advantage of opportunities to study abroad and have elected to remain in overseas jobs where pay was higher, facilities better and working conditions easier. This brain drain has alarmed the Government.

The bill as redrafted mobilizes provincial as well as national efforts. It obliges them to "take legislative, fiscal and administrative measures to help secure necessary research personnel, improve working conditions and rates of basic pay and fringe benefits, and promote public enlightenment and prefectural-central government interchange concerning science and technology."

The national Government would fix outlines for well-coordinated and sharply prospective long-range plans for promoting studies in those areas of importance it will henceforth be charged with establishing.

Government will invite scholars and technicians from private colleges, universities and institutes to participate, on a scholarship basis, while remaining on private payrolls, in important research studies.

But the bill again faces rough sledding in the Diet.

Many in academic circles fear gradual encroachment of big government in a country where bureaucracy from official agencies tends to throttle private scientific enterprise.

Academicians call the bill too narrow, with the social sciences still not included in its provisions.

Political opposition will arise from the Socialist Party. Leaders have vigorously criticized Japan's interest in things nuclear, even along atoms-for-peace lines, and have capitalized on lingering atomic allergy, arising from World War II. They have also taken the Government to task for joint programs, or joint suggested programs with the United States.

The Socialists call the bill a "government attempt to suborn hitherto independent Japanese scientists."

Those professors associated with the Socialist Party see the bill as an adroit means of muzzling them, under the guise of channeling all Japanese scientific activity into a single mass effort to meet world competition.

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