Letters

Chasing rainbows?

SIR: Once more we are regaled by the report of a committee composed—as usual!—"of leading educators," that of the Panel on Alternate Approaches to Graduate Education (C&EN, Dec. 24, 1973, page 35). I feel at a great disadvantage in having only the C&EN report in front of me but the necessity of making at least some reply before, hopefully, this report follows others into oblivion, mandates a quick (and mercifully brief) comment.

Once more the universities are being told that they must buckle on their soup kitchen aprons and save society! Let's make sure that we train these students in all those things which this panel *thinks* society wants and yet we of the universities are so ill qualified to do! The list of shibboleths is breath-taking: "enhance preparation for problem solving," "increase the breadth of students' outlooks," "make them aware . . . of industry" (Do I get cucumbers from sunshine or sunshine from cucumbers? I always forget!)—away with discipline-oriented attitudes (!)—"reorient themselves to fulfill a pivotal role in societal planning" (I enjoyed that one!), "too many overtrained students" (whatever that means!), "each major discipline . . . re-examine its . . . aims and social uses," "preferential treatment to groups hitherto discriminated (unfairly?) against" (Dr. Page's pronouncements on that question in column 3 of page 36 were sophistry of a high order). Need I continue?

One might seriously ask many questions but surely the first one is whether, perhaps, we have not already chased too many rainbows and whether each of us individually and departmentally should not simply ask ourselves whether we have not already strayed too far from our field of competence and expertise, that of educating students to think in chemical terms.

The hilarity engendered by the metaphor (?) at the end of the article prompted me to recall that, no doubt apocryphal, story about the great leader (or was it a committee?) who, having exhorted his followers on to greater things, replied to the anguished question of "but what should we *do*" with the ringing phrase "EVEN MORE!"

Thomas M. Dunn
Professor of Chemistry, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.

More on petrochemicals

SIR: The Jan. 7 issue of C&EN (page 5) quotes the Shah of Iran as saying, "You cannot get petrochemical products from atomic energy." Most of your readers will realize that statement is not quite correct. Mineral oil, the Shah's oil, is basically a grand mixture of hydrocarbons. Given limestone as a source of carbon, i.e. CO_2, water as a source of hydrogen via electrolysis, heat and electrical energy from nuclear power plants and some selected catalysts, the chemical industry can produce hydrocarbons as desired. Coal may now be a cheaper source of carbon than limestone and can yield either carbon monoxide or dioxide, or carbon monoxide and hydrogen with addition of water, without nuclear energy.

My point is that production of petrochemicals is possible without natural oil or gas, and even without coal given nuclear energy. The process is just one of energy conversion. The cost of hydrocarbons via this route sets an upper limit, in the long run, on the price of oil. That upper limit is probably not as much above the present price for oil as many would imagine. Much further along the road, an upper limit on the price of uranium is in turn set by the cost of recovery from the Gulf Stream for example, and doesn't frighten me at all.

I do agree with the Shah in the sense that an overall systems approach to oil consumption should be taken, and the best use be made of this nonrenewable resource. However, I remember two lines from my first chemistry textbook, authored by Prof. Cornish: "You can make anything from a salve to a star, if you only know how from black coal tar." The textbook was written before Chadwick proposed the existence of the neutron, and before oil was a commodity in the Middle East.

Deep River, Ont. W. H. Stevens

Use your right to vote

SIR: I am in accord with your editorial concern about the lack of votes sent in by ACS members in various elections and other matters where voting of the membership is concerned.

How about increasing the membership charges for those members who can't muster enough energy to vote? As an alternate, give reduced rates to those who are sufficiently interested in the Society to utilize their voting rights. That should gather a few more votes.

R. W. Curtis
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No asbestos here

SIR: I would like to point out that on page 19 of your Dec. 10, 1973, issue of C&EN, under the article "Asbestos health question perplexes experts," you have published a picture of a cement worker shaking out a bag of Utility Cement, which happens to be an insulating cement manufactured by C-E Refractories. We have not used asbestos in this product since early 1972, and we certainly don't appreciate the implication that this product is one that is dangerous to workers.

In the future, I would suggest that before using proprietary items in your articles you check with the manufacturer as to contents of materials, particularly in such sensitive areas as asbestos.

R. T. Hegeman
President, C-E Refractories, Valley Forge, Pa.

Yes, Dominique, there are . . .

SIR: Yes, Dominique, in spite of all rumors to the contrary, chemists are people (C&EN, Feb. 4, page 3). Some of us love the beauty of sun, stars and wind; some of us even write poems about sunsets.

A long time ago it was shown that there is a positive correlation between all human excellencies if you are willing to accept large feet as an excellency. So chemists, who are well above average in intelligence, are also musical, good, kind, and great people in general—with a few exceptions.

H. B. Hass
Summit, N.J.