

correspondence

Promoting renewable energy sources

SIR,—One of the many indirect lessons to be learnt from the Windscale Inquiry must be the consequence of promoting energy R&D in isolation from the wider implications arising when an energy source reaches the commercial stage.

It is generally accepted that investments now being made in possible options to oil and gas-fired power stations 20 years hence must be pitched at a high level if the options are to provide similar amounts of electricity to those at present produced by nuclear power (about 14%).

The renewable sources could form this back-up duty. However, their relatively diffuse form requires physically extensive work for the equivalent of even one large power station.

The wide and direct implications of this work could be seen by the public to be as potentially damaging in their own way as aspects of nuclear power. No time therefore must be lost in bringing forward all relevant facts for open discussion. For the renewable sources this can only be done through specific schemes in designated locations, hence studies of principles must not be divorced for long from the ways in which they may be realised in practice if the prospect of benefiting from them is not to be damagingly delayed.

Yours faithfully,

T. L. SHAW

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Argentinian haematologist disappears

SIR,—Dr Beatriz Iparraguirre-Weinstein, Head of the Clinical Haematology Unit at Ramos Mejia Hospital, Buenos Aires, disappeared in Buenos Aires on March 8, according to a telegram I and other British haematologists have received from her husband. The telegram asks us to contact the Argentinian government at the highest levels and petition for her release. Dr Iparraguirre-Weinstein is an internationally-known expert on abnormal haemoglobins and together with my colleagues and myself the original discoverer of the important haemoglobin Buenos Aires. She is a person of the highest integrity and unlikely to be involved in any sinister political plot.

Yours faithfully,

H. LEHMANN

University Department of Biochemistry,
Cambridge

Boycotts and repressive regimes

SIR,—R. Hoffenberg's views on boycotts (2 February, page 401) are unexceptionable, if trivial. Certainly in South Africa it is not frowned on to refuse to attend a function on the

grounds of one's political views, public or private. Of course, the same might not apply to some other countries that Hoffenberg would not hesitate to visit. I am moved to point out, though, not only that the paragraph does not follow from the rest of his points, but that these are suspect at best.

It is a facile assumption that "most genuine opponents" of most "repressive" governments would have been "dealt with". Just how many million political prisoners does he think jails can hold? If the blacks who have not been 'imprisoned, silenced by banning or even murdered' are not genuine opponents, the South African government must have one of the smallest bodies of opponents in history. Hoffenberg's corollary—to let those who are not in jail suffer—is therefore arrogant.

He also seems to confuse boycotting of conferences with economic boycotts. The latter may cause hardship to people and harm to the country; the former, on the other hand, has only politically negative effects. It offers ammunition for militant isolationists, drives moderates towards the hard-liners and deprives the country of that most valuable of political leaveners: personal exposure to the views of foreign colleagues.

The cited mobility of local scientists is not nearly as valuable—what proportion of the average institution can afford an overseas trip per year? In particular, such contacts are most valuable in countries whose political systems have been formed in an atmosphere of isolation. (See also 'Saudi Arabia and the travelling scientist' 2 February, page 392).

It is hard to know what to make of the view that the gratification of political militants is adequate reason for avoiding concrete political benefits. As to the suggestion that governments make propaganda capital out of a visit, experience in South Africa contradicts it. Granting the right and need for people to take political stances, it is sad to see such an unconstructive stance urged in a journal devoted to the progress of science.

If Hoffenberg thinks that sporting boycotts achieved anything apart from enraging the local rugby and cricket fraternities, he might do worse than explain it with reference to concrete fact. In the less public sports, racial divisions owed more to social than political factors. Where there was social contact between groups, they played each other, else not. Of all the political actions that drove whites into one camp in South Africa, the sporting boycotts must have had the highest ratio of effect to cause.

More to the point, professional and scientific circles are probably the most colour-blind in South Africa. Most of those who have to modify their activities to conform to the law, usually do so under vocal protest. National or international congresses are not directly affected anyway. They are generally open to all races. Sceptics about this claim may find it illuminating to canvass the views of leading South African universities and technical societies.

Finally it seems that anyone not silenced is not worth talking to and that anyone caring enough to see for himself instead of uncritically accepting Hoffenberg's views is merely 'inquisitive'. Also, we are to dismiss out of hand those professionals who remain in the country to achieve something. If anyone feels strongly enough to want to change a country's political system, let him immigrate, work and vote there. If South Africa is your field of concern, at least it is accessible to such measures, but if they seem too drastic, by all means pay a visit or attend a conference instead.

Yours faithfully,

J. M. RICHFIELD

Cobham, Surrey, UK

Radioactive whales?

SIR,—It occurred to me recently that the public fear of radioactivity, irrational as it is, might be made to serve a useful purpose. Many of us have been greatly moved by the efforts of organisations such as Greenpeace to save the whales and seals from extinction by brutal commercial interests. Why not make a few radioactive?

A radioactive material might be injected from a distance with the type of hypodermic dart used to tranquillise animals. There are several isotopes such as tritium, sulphur-35, iron-55, carbon-14 and so on which emit radiation sufficiently soft to be shielded even by the syringe wall but which can be presented in a form such that all the tissues of an animal become labelled a short time after injection. The isotope could be changed every year to provide valuable tracer information. It would probably be necessary to label only a dozen or so of each threatened species. The word would get around faster than Arab mercury in Israeli oranges and humanity would not approach those species again in our lifetime.

Yours faithfully,

MALCOLM THACKRAY

Menlo Park,
California, USA

Misleading headlines

SIR,—I read with interest the editorial discussing ambiguous or misleading headlines in newspapers and magazines (20 October, page 637). It seems that the headlines game is being played by nearly everybody but not, as you so carefully point out, by you. Imagine my surprise when I turned to page 644 of this same issue and began to read the article entitled 'Space retrieval' expecting a discussion of, say, satellite recovery or the Space Shuttle's reusable launch rockets, only to find that it was a report on the Soviet attempt to save face after Sovuz 25 failed to dock with Salyut 6. It appears that even the *Nature* reader does not always know what he is getting.

Yours faithfully,

JEFFREY W. PERCIVAL

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