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## SCIENTIFIC FREEDOM VERSUS SECRECY

THE importance of full freedom of communication of information has been emphasized, notably by Sir Henry Dale in addresses in Great Britain and also in his Pilgrim Trust lecture delivered in the United States last October; and he returned to that theme in his presidential address at Dundee to the British Association. His pleas, which have been reflected in the recent reviews of the work of the Carnegie Institution of Washington and of the Rockefeller Foundation by the respective presidents of those Institutions, Dr. Vannevar Bush and Dr. Raymond Fosdick, form part of a wider movement towards the restoration of a fundamental human freedom restricted during the War and seriously infringed in several countries during the two decades preceding the outbreak of war. In the definition of human rights and fundamental freedoms which forms Part II of the draft put forward by the United Kingdom representative on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, as a basis of discussion for an International Bill of Human Rights, Article 14 deals specifically with this question. Every person, it is submitted, "shall be free to express and publish his ideas orally, in writing, in the form of art or otherwise, and shall be free to receive and disseminate information of all kinds, including both facts, critical comments and ideas by books, newspapers, or oral instruction, and by the medium of all lawfully operated devices. These freedoms of speech and information may be subject only to necessary restrictions, penalties or liabilities arising out of considerations of national safety, the inciting to alter by violence the system of government or to promote disorder, crime, or obscenity, or injurious to human rights and fundamental freedoms, justice or the reputations of other persons."

Whatever reservations may well be held as to the practicability of framing definitions which will not be open to abuse, the question is engaging the serious attention of the United Nations. The fundamental provisions of the Bill of Rights relating to freedom of speech and information are to be completed by other agreements resulting from the work of a Sub-Commission on Freedom of Information and of the Press which has also been established by the Economic and Social Council, and which on May 19 began its work of making recommendations regarding the preparation and agenda of an International Conference on Freedom of Information. This Conference is to be called in March or April 1948, and a draft agenda which has already been approved by the Sub-Commission includes seven items. These cover the principles of freedom of information; the gathering of news and information; its transmission; the right of all persons and peoples to receive accurate, objective, comprehensive and representative information; the provision of machinery to promote the free flow of true information; and problems involved in the establishment of information services by Governments or other groups or persons to make information available in countries other than their own.

The fundamental principles which information media should observe in the performance of their functions were listed as four: to tell the truth without prejudice and to spread knowledge without malicious intent; to facilitate the solution of the economic, social and humanitarian problems of the world as a whole through the free interchange of information bearing on such problems; to help promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion; and to help maintain international peace and security through understanding and co-operation between peoples. The Sub-Commission will work in consultation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, and it is clear that it will be helped in its task not only by what that Organisation is already doing in promoting the provision of scholarships and exchange of personnel, but also by the investigations into the freedom of the Press which are already proceeding elsewhere. The Royal Commission to inquire into tendencies towards monopoly in the British newspaper press, set up as a result of a debate in the House of Commons last October, is clearly covering much ground in common with this Sub-Commission. A Commission on Freedom of the Press set up with R. M. Hutchins as chairman to inquire into the position in the United States has already reported, and both its General Report and the special studies still in preparation will make an important contribution to the general discussion.

The General Report of the American Commission\* points out that freedom of speech and of the Press is close to the central meaning of all liberty. Where men cannot freely convey their thoughts to one another, no other liberty is secure; and Sir Henry Dale in his Pilgrim Trust lecture emphasized that the right and duty to tell the world the truth which we discover, without regard to the interests of any person, prejudice, creed, political theory, or national policy, has been the central item in the charter of scientific freedom. Secrecy, he urged, is the main infection from which science sickens to-day, and accordingly it is the right and duty of the world's men of science to unite in warning the world of the danger which national policies threaten to the integrity of science by failing to free it from the secrecy accepted as a necessity of war.

There may be difference of opinion as to how far that threat of secrecy is a reality in Great Britain to-day. Prof. C. N. Hinshelwood, in his centenary address to the Chemical Society, welcomed the increasing readiness of chemical industry to publish scientific papers; but he was not, to use his own phrase, 'tilting at a windmill' when he went on to express the hope that the whips of commercial secrecy would not be succeeded by the scorpions of military security. Such misgivings have largely arisen out of the provisions of the Atomic Energy Act, and despite the Government's manifest intention that the new powers shall involve the least possible

interference with the freedom of science, as has already been pointed out in these columns (*Nature*, 159, 807; 1946), great care will be required in framing orders for exemption so that genuine discussion is not impeded; the price to be paid for leakage of information may easily be too high. Moreover, even if no exclusion of workers from other countries from the laboratories where nuclear or other 'secret' work is in progress is involved, no one country can be altogether indifferent to the position elsewhere. The new law on disclosure of State secrets published in Moscow on June 11 is a portent which may more than outweigh movements among scientific workers themselves, such as the American Chemical Society's appropriation last year for promoting international understanding and goodwill by enabling foreign chemists and chemical engineers to pursue advanced study in the United States, or the more recent Centenary Fund of the Chemical Society for promoting the international interchange of new chemical knowledge through lectures by distinguished chemists from overseas or participation of its fellows in scientific meetings overseas. The new Russian law classifies, among other subjects, as secret and not to be disclosed under penalties up to twenty years imprisonment, "information constituting State secrets concerning industry as a whole and individual branches of it, agriculture, trade and transport", and "discoveries, inventions, technical improvements, research and experimental work in all branches of science, technology and national economy".

It is not merely that the existence of such a law makes nonsense of any agreement on control of atomic energy through an inspectorate. The discussion on the Atomic Energy Act in Great Britain last year is sufficient to show how dangerous such an outlook is to the very existence of science; and no amount of goodwill to science in other countries can disguise the appearance of an infection and a danger that would have seemed incredible to the international band of men of science a hundred years ago, of whom Prof. John Reed spoke at the centenary meeting of the Chemical Society. Even before the fresh restrictions on newsprint came into force on July 21, the meagre reports in leading newspapers of such important events as the centenary meetings of the Chemical Society and the International Congress of Pure and Applied Chemistry supplied a striking example of the inadequacy of existing supplies of newsprint for meeting the needs of society for the communication of news and ideas. The American Commission on the Freedom of the Press observes in its report that where freedom of expression exists, the germ of a free society is already present and a means at hand for every extension of liberty. Such witness to the importance of full freedom of scientific communication is doubly valuable at this moment. Not only should those in Britain and other free countries unite their efforts to prevent any further extension of the area of secrecy, but also they should follow with the closest attention the debate now proceeding on the question of freedom of communication.

\* A Free and Responsible Press. A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspapers, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines and Books. By the Commission on Freedom of the Press. Pp. xii+139. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; London: Cambridge University Press, 1947.) 2 dollars.