

... in public or private?

Colin Norman in Washington examines the arguments which two recent events involving Soviet dissident scientists have helped to regenerate in the USA's scientific community.

ON DECEMBER 12 last year, Sergei A. Kovalev, a Soviet biologist, was convicted of "anti-soviet agitation and propaganda" and sentenced to seven years in prison with hard labour, to be followed by three years of exile. His offence was that he had spoken out in defence of human rights and disseminated outlawed literature. Although he had been in jail for nearly a year waiting trial, Kovalev's plight raised little outcry in the West.

In contrast, early this month Leonid I. Plyushch, a mathematician, was released from a psychiatric institution in which he had been forcibly detained for nearly three years, and allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Plyushch's incarceration, for offences similar to those charged to Kovalev, had provoked many public protests from groups in the West, including scientific organisations and the French Communist Party.

To many observers here, those two events underline a simple and obvious fact—public outcry in the West can play a decisive role in tempering the Soviet government's repression of so-called dissident scientists and intellectuals. And that is precisely why the National Academy of Sciences, the most prestigious scientific organisation in the United States, is being pressured to make more public representations on behalf of individual scientists in the Soviet Union, and to speak out more forcibly in defence of human rights.

Although a few individuals have long urged the Academy to adopt a more aggressive public stand on such matters, the issue has recently received some publicity because of an open dispute between the Academy President, Philip Handler, and Jeremy J. Stone, Director of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), a liberal organisation with a membership of 7,000 which lobbies for such causes as arms control.

The dispute centres on a brief item in the December issue of the FAS newsletter, in which Stone related three complaints about the Academy's public posture in regard to Soviet dissidents, which he heard directly from beleaguered Soviet scientists. Stone picked up the complaints during a recent visit to the Soviet Union on behalf of the FAS to investigate the problems faced by Soviet scientists who have criticised official policies or who

have applied for exit visas; he printed the complaints as part of a detailed account of his findings.

Handler was incensed by Stone's reporting of the complaints because he claims that it represents a gross distortion of the Academy's actions. He fired off an angry, eight-page letter to the FAS president, Philip Morrison, defending the Academy's record, accusing Stone of an "ugly act", and demanding an apology. Beneath the anger, however, lies a serious issue, namely, what is the best way in which the Academy can use its prestige to seek relief for harassed Soviet scientists, or for scientists in similar predicaments elsewhere in the world?

The Academy operates a number of scientific exchange agreements between the United States and other countries, a fact which gives Academy officials extensive contact with their counterparts in the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In the past few years, those contacts have been used occasionally for private, face-to-face representations by the Academy to seek relief for individual Soviet scientists who have been harassed, dismissed from their jobs or imprisoned for such offences as applying for visas to emigrate to Israel, criticising Soviet policies or speaking up in defence of human rights.

In 1972, for example, during a visit to Washington by M. V. Keldysh, then President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Handler and other Academy officials took the opportunity to protest the imposition of hefty exit taxes on scientists who had applied for emigration visas. And early in 1973, during a visit to Moscow, Handler made repre-



Jeremy Stone, FAS Director

sentations on behalf of Benjamin Levich, an eminent Soviet electrochemist who had been fired from his job after applying for a visa to emigrate to Israel. Handler says he took up Levich's case with Keldysh and President Podgorny, and he even asked Keldysh to deliver a letter to Levich awarding him a prize from the American Electrochemical Society and inviting him to the United States to give a lecture. Keldysh refused to accept the letter and accused Handler and the Electrochemical Society of "playing politics".

Handler was therefore particularly incensed by one of the complaints in the FAS newsletter, that during his visit to Moscow he had snubbed Levich by refusing to meet him. Handler said that Levich in fact telephoned him at his hotel an hour after he arrived and invited him to his house. Handler says he refused because such a visit would blunt the impact of his private negotiations on Levich's behalf, a position which is consistent with his view that the Academy should conduct such negotiations in private, without making a public fuss. Similar sentiments are expressed by George S. Hammond, the Academy's Foreign Secretary. Hammond says that "having chosen the quiet diplomacy approach, I think we should stick to it. If we go to Moscow and hold private discussions and then make public statements, it would be a breach of confidence and undermine our position".

Stone, however, takes a different view. "All of my Soviet experience during six visits," he says, "suggests that complaints made in private are often ignored, while those made publicly must be dealt with." As far as Handler's refusal to visit Levich is concerned, Stone notes that because of the publicity which would have attended such a visit, "I have no doubt that Levich was more interested in having Handler visit him while he was in Moscow than in any representations that Handler could have made for him privately".

The Academy has, however, made one very public protest. In September 1973, when the press campaign against Andrei Sakharov was at its height, Handler sent a sharply worded protest to Keldysh, warning that unless harassment of Sakharov ceased, scientific cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union could be jeopardised. Shortly thereafter, the press campaign abruptly stopped. Though Sakharov has, of course, come in for more criticism and intimidation since, it is widely believed that he is no longer in imminent personal danger. According to Pavel Litvinov, a Soviet physicist who was exiled to Siberia after protesting against the Russian invasion of

Czechoslovakia, and who is now living in the United States, "the representation by the National Academy of Sciences in the case of Sakharov was effective. Of that I am sure". He added that "in every case when the Soviet bureaucracy has given in, it has been done by open pressure". Handler maintains that the public protest on Sakharov's behalf was made in response to a critical situation—the fear that Sakharov was about to be arrested and tried for treason. He suggested that such an approach should not be used in less dramatic situations.

Stone believes, however, that the initial success of the Sakharov protest should convince the Academy that occasional public protests would greatly strengthen its hand in private negotiations. And Lipman Bers, an Academy member and President of the American Mathematical Association who has made representations on behalf of beleaguered scientists in several countries, notes that "my impression and experience is that so-called quiet diplomacy and public protests reinforce each other". Similarly, Harrison Brown, a former Foreign Secretary of the National Academy of Sciences who played a key role in the Academy's protest over Sakharov, suggests that "if anything, the Academy has erred on the side of not doing enough publicly", though he adds that he believes that the private approach "has tempered Soviet actions" and notes that "it is very difficult to get a proper balance between public and private approaches".

Stone, meanwhile, is working to get the prestige of Academy members behind some public protests to be launched by the FAS on behalf of dissident Soviet scientists. Last month, he sent a letter to every member of the Academy, asking whether they would be willing to lend their support to petitions "for scientists being denied the right to function as scientists". He said last week that he anticipates a positive response from about 25% of the Academy's members. In addition, he has circulated a petition among physicist members of the National Academy of Sciences asking for their support for Andrei Tverdokhlebov, a physicist who was arrested nine months ago for allegedly disseminating false material and whose trial is imminent. A very high proportion has already responded. A petition has also been mailed to some 20,000 biologists in support of Kovalev. Stone also attempted, unsuccessfully, to ensure that international observers would be allowed at Kovalev's trial.

The Academy is therefore under some pressure to take a more aggressive, public stand in support of dissident Soviet scientists. It should be noted, however, that such a move would draw

strong criticism from the State Department and other government agencies since it would seem to run counter to the spirit of detente. The Administration would much prefer a quasi-government body like the Academy to work behind the scenes, leaving the public protesting to private organizations like the FAS.

The issue of how learned societies should handle relations with their

counterparts in the Soviet Union has, of course, also been aired in other countries. In the UK scientists debated the subject on television in 1973, and in 1974 the Council of the Royal Society considered the issue following an initiative by Professor John Ziman. The continuing low profile of the society makes it reasonable to assume that proposals for a more public stance were turned down. □

An appeal for help

THE following quotations are taken from a letter written by Valentin F. Turchin, a Soviet mathematician who was fired from his job in July 1974 after he had made a public statement in defence of Andrei Sakharov. Turchin, who is chairman of the Soviet group of Amnesty International, has been out of work for 18 months, and has applied for permission to visit the United States to work at Columbia University. He was informed on December 15 that his application had been denied. The letter was received on January 13 by Jeremy Stone, the FAS Director. Turchin says that he wants it to be discussed by the scientific community in the West. It will eventually be published in full by the Khronika Press in New York.

Turchin begins by describing the harassment and the trial last month of Sergei Kovalev. Kovalev, an eminent biologist, was given the maximum sentence of 7 years' imprisonment with hard labour and a further three years of exile within the Soviet Union for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda". Noting that, together with Sakharov, he had appealed for help for Kovalev from Western scientists, Turchin states that "there was no response deserving to be mentioned and I don't know whether there was any response at all . . . No action was made which could have attracted serious public attention and influenced Soviet authorities. The world scientific community betrayed Kovalev".

He continues: "You are very proud, my dear colleagues, that you separate science from what you call politics. You do not go in for politics, you say. Neither do we. Dissidents in the Soviet Union do not go in for politics: they struggle for air. What you are separating science from is not politics but mere decency. And in fact, it is not separation, but a reversal, changing of the sign. For whatever you think, you are not neutral in the conflict between totalitarianism and freedom. You actively cooperate with totalitarianism, support it . . .

"People of science are intrinsic enemies of totalitarianism, because they professionally need intellectual freedom. The core of the Soviet dissidents consists mainly of scientists. But the state presents to the scientist a dilemma; either to support totalitarianism, to lie and betray comrades, or to challenge it to some extent and pay in proportion, by professional losses up to the point of losing work and freedom. The Western scientific community helps to conduct this policy by fully accepting the totalitarian rules of the game in scientific contacts with the USSR and the satellite countries. One example will suffice: did you ever turn back a Soviet delegation because the scientists you had invited were not included [because they were] politically unreliable? Politically reliable people, that is those who help strangle the recalcitrant, are allowed by the Soviet authorities to come out on the international scene. You give your sanction to this selection . . .

"Why not demand, for example, that a small proportion of those who participate in scientific exchange—say, one in ten—must be the other side's choice, and if not, then firmly refuse to cooperate? Scientists hold powerful levers of influence on totalitarian countries. Why do they not use them to save a colleague from imprisonment? . . .

"The detente is necessary, I'm completely for the detente. But in the absence of strong public pressure for human rights all over the world the detente will automatically lead to proliferation of totalitarianism. The Helsinki agreement reveals a typical pattern: the West makes real concessions in exchange for imaginary ones from the East. After Helsinki, the situation with human rights in the USSR has become only worse . . . The proponents of the Helsinki agreement argued that it would provide the grounds for exerting pressure on the USSR for exchange of people and ideas. But what is the use of the grounds if there is no desire to exert pressure? . . ."