CORRESPONDENCE

Radical writings

SIR — Dr Turner's letter (*Nature* 4 June, p.374) makes the disturbing claim, citing the exchange between Dawkins and myself as evidence, that "the radical scientific opposition to racism requires a denial that there is any genetic variation of any significance from place to place within the human species". I wonder what on Earth he has been reading which provides support for such an assertion? As someone who has been reading, writing and teaching in this area for some years now, I can't remember ever seeing such a claim, and I would be interested if he could produce a single statement from the writings of "radical" biologists since the sociobiology and IQ debates started in the late 1960s which could support his allegation.

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Australian 2,4,5-T

SIR — Since you published our letter¹ on "Antipodean 2,4,5-T", a sample of the herbicide imported into Australia has been brought to our attention. It had been submitted to the Australian Tariff Board by the importer as a sample of a very large consignment on which lower tariffs had been sought. It was recently analysed by the West Australian Government laboratories and found to consist essentially of the isobutyl ester of 2,4,5-T, and to contain 19 mg per kg of 2,3,7,8-TCDD on an "as received" basis, and 26 mg per kg on a 2,4,5-T basis. (The level of TCDD (2,3,7,8-tetrachlorocyclohexa-*p*-dioxin) in 2,4,5-T considered acceptable in Australia at the time was 0.1 mg per kg.)

Evidence given before the Tariff Board inquiry suggests the material may have been produced from fire-damaged potassium trichlorophenolate (KTCP). [A synthetic route to 2,3,7,8-TCDD is through the heating of KTCP^{2,3}.] A letter from the Singapore High Commission (Australia) has confirmed that a fire occurred in the premises of the importer's Singapore company, and pointed out that (1) there were reports of chloracne in the factory workers and (2) after the fire, the neighbouring factory complained of symptoms in its workers. The importer himself described this "fire damaged" material as of "good value"⁴, and so one assumes that it entered commerce in Australia.

All of this makes more pressing our concern for Australia's epidemiological inquiry into Vietnam veterans' claims. Use of 2,4,5-T with such high levels of TCDD can prejudice the controls in this study. It will also have implications for ordinary civilian usage.

We hope that one result of our work will be that the Australian authorities will increase their surveillance of chemical imports.

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Conservation areas

SIR — It would seem injudicious for Dr Ratcliffe to claim¹, as his guarantee of rightness, the wisdom of Parliament when a minister of the Crown can say², after receiving the advice of the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) "I welcome the international recognition that it is totally unacceptable for species to be allowed to disappear", though this is quite in keeping with the NCC's concern to safeguard Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) "in perpetuity". If the NCC has not got the financial resources to provide invariable, immediate and adequate compensation to the owners of SSSIs, how will their perpetual preservation policy prevent glacial readvance over the Black Wood of Rannoch, or pluvial destruction of the Pennine limestone pavements, or, perhaps, provide fall-out shelters for Dartford warblers?

I suppose that one must expect if one has the temerity to express an unfashionable point of view that one will be misunderstood accidentally and deliberately^{3,4}, so may I make it clear that I am not advocating the wilful destruction of anything, organism or habitat, but I do feel that anyone, acting as a scientist, needs a better excuse than a personal predilection for the rare, the exotic, or the *status quo* before he asks people to forgo the benefits of cultivating their gardens or puts others to the national expense of compensating them for their abstinence. I had been led to believe that science was an organized body of knowledge concerned with the physical world as we find it, static or dynamic as the case may be, that scientists were by their training perhaps better equipped than most to make reliable predictions of the likely outcome of the processes which they observe, but that as scientists they have no claim to superior knowledge or wisdom in prescribing what goals or courses of action are desirable on moral, political or economic grounds. It is against this assumption of authority, which is more than hinted at in Dr Ratcliffe's last sentence, that I am railing.

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Israeli raid

SIR — I was unpleasantly surprised to read the leading article in *Nature* entitled "Making Israel atone for Tamuz" (18 June, p.523). I and many others of your readers are of the view that *Nature* is a scientific journal, which justifiably includes articles on scientific or educational policy in addition to the research material which it publishes. However, this was an article of a purely political nature, written about a very sensitive issue without any backing of specialized knowledge. It was in my view an unwise decision to publish such an article in *Nature* and a dangerous precedent.

It is, of course, impossible to enter into a full discussion with you on the reasons for Israel's decision to bomb the nuclear plant in

Iraq, but there are certain facts which have been ignored in this article, which should be brought to your attention.

(1) There is a great deal of evidence that Iraq has ambitions to acquire a nuclear weapon and it has built up its military power in the last few years to an alarming magnitude. As this country is at war with Israel, having consistently refused to enter into any peace negotiations, this must be a serious threat to the security of Israel.

(2) To ask Israel to accept the report of the UN International Atomic Energy Agency is expecting a lot, in view of the attitude of the United Nations and its agencies towards Israel in the past. If Israel is to survive it must depend on its own intelligence assessments. This is exactly what it did in this case, and it acted before it was too late.

(3) The article ignores the fact that Israel has never refused to enter into peace negotiations with its Arab neighbours. Except in the case of Egypt these countries have not only refused but quite openly proclaimed their ambition to destroy the State of Israel; Iraq has been one of the leading advocates of this policy. Under these circumstances how can one expect Israel to enter into a "Non-Proliferation Treaty"?

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Forbes, not Wallace

SIR — In his review of a recent symposium on biogeography, Colin Patterson regards A. R. Wallace as the inventor of "biogeography in the accepted sense", and gives the impression that he thinks very little of the scientific competence of Charles Darwin in this context (*Nature, News and Views* 25 June, p.612).

I refrained from joining in the previous arguments in your columns about cladism, evolution and Darwin, but in this instance I must protest that in enthroning Wallace and demoting Darwin, Dr Patterson is overplaying his hand and ignoring the earlier literature. Darwin was well aware that the continents were not immutable (see the sketch of 1842 and the essay of 1844), and that previous epochs may have had land connections different from those of the present. It is incorrect to claim that evolutionary hypotheses based on unchanging continents dominated biogeographical thinking up to the 1960s, when Wegener's views were finally accepted by orthodox geophysicists. Many of the published biological arguments of the period were about the extent and timing of the land and sea connections, not whether they existed.

Darwin was also aware of contemporary studies of geographical distribution, such as the excellent review of Edward Forbes, not mentioned by Dr Patterson, published in the first volume of the *Memoirs of the Geological Survey*, 1848. In this article Forbes clearly stated an hypothesis for a previous land connection between the Iberian peninsula and Ireland. If anyone is to be selected as the father of biogeography it should be Forbes.

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