British science

Researchers find a voice

BRITISH scientists, traditionally quiet and uncomplaining, have expressed their anger, in the form of Save British Science (SBS), an "appeal to public and Parliament to call on the Government to reverse the decline in support for scientific research", which was launched in London this week. Four Members of Parliament (MPs) are proposing a debate in the House of Commons, and will ask the government to spend £100 million this year on basic science research — enough to keep Britain level with other European countries.

Professor Denis Noble, one of the scientists launching the appeal, said this week that "a few years ago it would have been unthinkable that someone in my position would speak out publicly" about the state of science spending in Britain. The decline in real terms (see graph) at a time when France, West Germany, Italy and Japan are increasing

Government funding of basic research in the United Kingdom, France and West Germany. Triangles, data from the *Annual Review of Government Funded R & D 1984 and 1985*. Dotted lines, policies based on recent ministerial reports.

research spending, means that "selectivity is becoming a polite word for retreat, which is now in danger of becoming a debacle", according to Dr J. Mulvey, secretary of SBS. Noble described examples of scientists leaving to work abroad, obsolete equipment and occasions where scientists who had written successful grant proposals did not receive enough money for their own salaries, but only enough for the project itself.

SBS has collected more than 1,500 contributions since it was formed last November, and claims that grassroots support is "snowballing". But, apart from an advertisement in *The Times* about the predicament of British science, no coherent policy has yet emerged. Others have already pointed out the dangers of failing adequately to support basic science research to the government, with little success. The group must turn into efficient lobbyists for parliamentary support, and, as suggested by the MPs present at its

launch, be both apolitical and efficient in communicating with the Government. SBS should have a formal membership so that it can genuinely reflect the wishes of its supporters and become an effective force in popularizing the need for research. It wants to obtain more support for research from industry, and thinks that government-induced collaborations between industry and academics are unlikely to produce more money for basic research

Refusnik scientists

Dissenting dissidents agree

LEARNED societies campaigning for oppressed scientists in the Soviet Union should avoid mentioning "human rights" in letters to the Soviet scientific establishment, Dr Alexander Voronel of Tel Aviv University told a seminar in Oxford this week. The seminar, for representatives of national academies of science and learned societies, had met to discuss what such bodies can do to help Jewish *refusnik* scientists. Although there were some vehement objections to Dr Voronel's view, notably from a delegate from the United States who described himself as an "academic lawyer", Dr Voronel's record as founder and first convener of the original Moscow Sunday seminar for *refusniks* gave his views considerable weight.

Dr Voronel's contention is that any mention of "human rights" is an automatic irritant to Soviet officialdom, which counters by alleging that the West is trying to interfere in internal Soviet policy. One should rather campaign, he said, for Soviet scientists to be allowed to exercise their professional rights of appropriate employment, unrestricted professional correspondence, participation in scientific gatherings both at home and abroad, and — the particular issues in the case of *refusniks* — the right to emigrate. This "right", incidentally, is now of paramount importance to the *refusniks*; a message to the seminar from three leading *refusnik* scientists, Victor Brailovskii, Mark Freidlin and Aleksandr Ioffe, urged all well-wishers "in view of the extreme urgency of our problem, [to] put aside all other aspects of our being here, and the difficulties encountered in our daily lives" and campaign only on the emigration issue.

Mr Fabian Kolker, the US philanthropist, who two years ago founded a scholarship for *ex-refusniks* at Tel Aviv University, summed up the views of both Voronel and the *refusniks'* letter. "Our goal should be success in unlocking the gates of the Soviet Union", he said, "and we must therefore use language that the Soviets will accept."

whereas a tax-credit system for industries that fund this type of research is more likely to achieve the aim.

In Parliament, SBS could investigate the setting up of a body like the US Office of Technical Assessment, to advise MPs on scientific issue and to contribute to informed debate and wider general acceptance of the importance of science. A policy must also be formulated on whether or not Britain should have a representative at cabinet level specifically for science, or how seriously to take the Prime Minister's contention that she represents the interests of scientists.

Maxine Clarke

How to put more leverage behind such "language" was the main point of discussion. The chairman, Dr Inga Fischer-Hjalmars of the University of Stockholm, presented an 11-point programme of suggested action, particularly slanted towards making intervention by Western colleagues a "professional" and not merely a humanitarian matter. Thus *refusniks* can be elected to the appropriate learned societies, or asked to join editorial boards of scientific journals, giving such societies or boards a valid interest in the welfare of and continuous contacts with their fellow members. (A suggestion from the floor extended this to asking *refusniks* to review books, which would have the additional bonus of supplying them with works in their field.)

If learned societies are to help, however, they must concern themselves, the consensus of the seminar agreed, not just with *refusniks* but with the whole range of breaches of human rights under all forms of repressive regime. This has always been a divisive issue, with Israeli scientists maintaining that one must not confuse *refusniks* and dissidents, while their foreign colleagues pointed out that it was impossible to ask a fellow faculty member to sign a petition on behalf of Brailovskii or Shcharanskii, and they refuse to sign the petition he was organizing on behalf of oppressed scientists in Turkey or South Africa. This time, however, there was little contention. It is now accepted, even by the Israelis, that learned societies and academics have human rights committees that campaign across the political board for scientists victimized for their convictions. Nevertheless, as Dr Kristoffer Gjotterud of Oslo pointed out, the distinction is a real one, and in campaigning for Soviet scientists in trouble, he stressed that one should never confuse the dissidents who wish to change what they see as inherent injustices in the Soviet system and the Jewish *refusniks* who are penalized for wishing to leave the Soviet Union altogether.

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