

Elizabethan snobbery?

SIR—P. J. Smart's personal attack (*Nature* 348, 384; 1990) on Mr Stan Wood's motives in his sale of the earliest known reptile is reminiscent of the way in which Victorian snobbery retarded the advance of palaeontological science by decades by failing to take account of the work of aspiring researchers from the lower classes.

Smart's opinion of Wood is certainly not shared by those workers in site conservation, museums and vertebrate palaeontology who actually know anything about Wood's discoveries of novel forms and his infective enthusiasm, collaboration with researchers and conservationists, and financial grants to students at conferences.

Smart, by implication, would have approved if Wood had had a research grant from the Royal Museum of Scotland to pay his salary, workers' salary, rental of quarry, collaboration with researchers and museums, levy to local authority and

general operating overheads. So why is Smart upset that Wood has, as it were, carried out his research at his own risk, being paid only with hindsight after demonstrating his extraordinary success in finding the reptile and much else that could not have been foreseen?

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SIR—In response to P. J. Smart, we wish to make the following points:

(1) At one time Mr Stan Wood was employed as a fossil collector, but when the grants supporting his work came to an end he was made redundant. Rather than accepting the extinction of his talent, he decided to try to make his living as a self-employed fossil collector. He passed through a period of considerable financial hardship and anxiety for his family, until

his discovery of sufficient new material to allow him to pay off his debts. To imply that he is avaricious is unjust.

(2) The price of "Lizzie" reflects not only its uniqueness, but also the expertise, time, logistical support and effort required for its discovery. The sum of money involved is trivial compared with the price of comparably important art works.

(3) Wood's professional openness and cooperation with researchers has consistently allowed proper studies to be made of his commercially available material. His work has been directly responsible for the inception of many research projects, including the completion of several PhDs.

(4) The price placed on this fossil material will help museum and research funding authorities to appreciate the value of our national collections (and the importance of their curation), and thus the relative value of properly funded fieldwork.

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Leaving the lab

SIR—In a recent leading article, "Era of disappointment" (*Nature* 348, 375; 1990), you state that "It is curious that the first British prime minister with a technical qualification should have become so closely associated with the decline of basic science in Britain" and describe Mrs Thatcher as someone "expected to be sympathetic" to the cause of basic research.

My question is why should an ex-scientist be expected to have any more regard for science than a non-scientist? Ex-scientists arise in two main ways, either willingly or unwillingly. For examples of the former, one need think only of the significant numbers of students and postgraduate students who, at the end of a three-year stint, wish never to set foot in a laboratory again. These people would certainly not be "expected to be sympathetic" to science. Next, there, are those who, although they do not share the strong feelings of the first group, see no prospect of an acceptable career for themselves in science and leave to become accountants or tax inspectors (or politicians and prime ministers). This group spans most of the age range from the newest graduate to the established lecturer, and once they have made their move will presumably use any influence to improve the lot of their new profession rather than that of science.

Finally, there are those who leave science unwillingly, unable to find a job in their chosen field or unable to fund their research. These people are often further displeased by the uncaring attitude to their plight of many established academics whose sole concern is their own next

grant. This last group, having doubtless invested several years in science before being cast adrift, have no reason to regard the scientific establishment with any fondness.

So, to answer my own question, ex-scientists are, if anything, likely to be less sympathetic to the furthering of basic science than non-scientists. Certainly no sympathy should be expected on the basis of their past associations. This last applies particularly to all politicians on any subject — just ask former prime minister Mrs Thatcher.

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Sentimental journey

SIR—The leading article "Era of disappointment" makes an observation by the US historian Richard Hofstadter in the 1955 book, *The Age of Reform*, seem very relevant. In the introduction, he noted:

While it is always both feasible and desirable to formulate ideal programs of reform, it is asking too much to expect that history will move, so to speak, in a straight line to realize them. Liberal intellectuals, who have rather well-rationalized systems of political beliefs, tend to expect that the masses of people, whose actions at certain moments in history coincide with some of these beliefs, will share their other convictions as a matter of logic and principle. Intellectuals, moreover, suffer from a sense of isolation which they usually seek to surmount by finding ways of getting into a rapport with the people, and they readily

succumb to a tendency to sentimentalize the folk. Hence they periodically exaggerate the measure of agreement that exists between movements of popular reform and the considered principles of political liberalism (p. 19).

This seems appropriate to Margaret Thatcher as well as to the leader writer.

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Weighty argument

SIR—Let's temper the bicentennial celebration of the metric system (*Nature* 348, 105; 1990) with a few sobering literary facts. Had the metric revolution come sooner or been sweeping, we would be heirs to a cultural wasteland. Pound for pound (kilogram for kilogram?), metric units are as cold as bone. For the bards, the British Imperial System was the measure of verse. Shakespeare's Shylock never demanded his 454 grams of flesh, and Robert Frost never had "kilometres to go before I sleep". How far would Erskine Caldwell have gone with *God's Little Hectare*, or Jules Verne with *96,450 Kilometres Under the Sea*? Clearly, in literature an ounce of metric prevention was worth a pound of cure. Metric units have made one inroad into day-to-day language: kilo is the measure and talk of the drug trade.

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