

Congrès du Palais de la Découverte

International Meeting in Paris

WHEN the President of the French Republic entered the main hall of the Sorbonne to take part in the opening of the 'Congrès du Palais de la Découverte', many were struck by the civic simplicity of his appearance, contrasting strangely with that usually associated with assemblies in which the political heads of States take part. Even the accompanying sounds of the Marseillaise seemed merely to give an objective commentary on the political situation: 'Contre nous de la tyrannie l'étandard sanglant est levé. . . .' The opening speeches of the Minister of Education, and of Jean Perrin, who acted as president of the Congress, echoed this anxiety. Both speakers affirmed their belief that the independent search for truth embodied in science is the best safeguard of civilization against threatening destruction. Jean Perrin went to the length of acclaiming science as the new supreme religion destined to reign over the happy future.

At the first moment these utterances appeared strange and exaggerated, yet as the meeting went on, bringing out one symptom after another of the world-wide struggle of international science with various local tyrannies, they gained a very simple significance.

The political situation of science unfolded itself as the various delegates rose to greet the Congress. When, after the English and the Americans, the Germans got up they were listened to with the consideration due to the hardy survivors from a great flood. Later in the evening, in conversation with one of the German delegates, he spoke to me about a better understanding between the German and French peoples; and three delegates used what seemed to me to be the same official phrase. The Italian delegates did not mention politics. The U.S.S.R. was not represented by a single member. Great applause went up when the delegate of 'the Spanish Government' was called. He said little, but the words 'in the name of the Academy of Madrid' made all the subdued terror of the situation flare up in a momentary blaze. The Portuguese who followed him, the Jew who spoke later for the University of Jerusalem, evoked in turn their particular fringe of political associations, and so did the fact that no Japanese delegate appeared. By the time the list had finished the political scene of the world was fully illuminated, and on it the new situation of science was well visible.

Science, and generally the independent search of truth, is destroyed when political liberty falls. The totalitarian States which claim to be supreme spiritual beings can admit no independent thought, be it religious, political or scientific. By its very nature such thought must claim superiority to temporal power and is therefore incompatible with totalitarianism. Thus it is quite logical that in such States the position assigned to science by the official philosophies of dialectic materialism and racialism respectively should be merely to serve the higher aims of the State.

In view of this common fate shared by independent science and political liberty, the opening speeches of the Congress appeared in a clearer light. Their appeal to science from the depth of political anxiety was guided by the recognition that the link between science and liberty is completely reciprocal: while the profession of truth needs for its protection the free institution of democracy, these institutions themselves must decay and fall if people abandon their belief in reason. The idea of liberty derives its strength from many roots but among these there is one most vital: the belief that men can reach a better understanding by free discussion, that in fact society can be continuously improved if public life is steadily guided by reasoned controversy. It was a controversy on the question of a single fact from which about half a century ago the present political system of France emerged. A handful of men had faced the violence of the Government and the fury of the populace to establish the innocence of Dreyfus. They won, and modern political France was built on their victory. To-day the rise of a new threat to liberty causes the French Government to appeal with anxious hope to the men whose profession embodies the right to reasoned controversy and whose political duty is to defend this right. M. POLANYI.

PHYSICS

THIS international congress of physicists, chemists and biologists was conceived and organized within ninety days, chiefly through the initiative of M. Frederic Joliot-Curie, who was the chairman of the executive committee. It was attended by eleven hundred men of science