Editorial

Can science and politics really be divorced?

The Jagellonian University was founded in Kracow by Casimir the Great, King of Poland, in 1364. After Prague it was the second oldest university north of the Alps in central Europe. It grew steadily in stature after its foundation and was for many years the major seat of learning for Poland and also for Lithuania. Theology, astronomy and mathematics were topics of major importance at the university. Copernicus, whose memory has always been honoured at the university, was a pupil of Adalbertus of Brudzewo, Professor of Astronomy in Kracow. Experts in geography and cartography at Kracow also acquired fame internationally in the 15th and 16th centuries, but there was some reduction in overall academic standards in the 17th and 18th centuries. After the Napoleonic wars, Kracow and the surrounding areas gained the status of an autonomous republic but the city was still controlled to some degree by powerful forces from Austria, Russia and Prussia. True cultural autonomy was achieved in 1870 and thereafter the Jagellonian University flourished again. Faculties were developed in Medicine, Law and Natural Sciences and for the next 50 years the University drew to Kracow the most eminent Polish scholars.

In September 1939, the armies of Adolf Hitler invaded Poland and the country came rapidly under Nazi domination. On 6th November 1939, the Nazi police surrounded the main building of the Jagellonian University and arrested 183 professors and other academic staff in the building.¹ The official explanation for these arrests was that the Jagellonian University had 'shown its hostility to Germany by declaring its intention to resume lectures and enrolling students'. In reality it was feared that the academic community there might form a nucleus of intellectuals who would oppose the nazification of Poland. The senior academics were sent to the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen where some eventually died. Others were released after many months or even years as a result of intervention by authoritative international agencies, including the Vatican. Sixty years later the Jagellonian University is fully re-established and few survive today who remember in any detail the horrors of the Second World War. The names of those who died in 1940 and 1941 are commemorated on a stone plaque mounted on the second floor of the university's magnificent Collegium Novum Building (Figure 1).

In February 2000, members of the Freedom party in Austria, led by Jorg Haider, were invited to form part of an Austrian coalition government. For some years Haider had been known to hold extreme right wing political views and observers from outside Austria, and many from within, felt that his commitment to the democratic process was and remains unconvincing. The European Group for Blood and Marrow Transplantation was scheduled to hold its annual

Figure 1 The plaque in the Collegium Novum building in Kracow erected in memory of senior faculty members who died in 1940 and 1941.

meeting in Innsbruck and some felt that it should be boycotted as an expression of condemnation of the Austrian government. The prestigious Société Française de Greffe de Moelle recommended that its members should not attend the Innsbruck meeting and others shared that view on a more personal level. The EBMT Board called an emergency meeting and considered its options. The decision was eventually taken to proceed with the Innsbruck meeting but to incorporate a demonstration of disapproval of the Austrian coalition government.

Was this the right decision? Should EBMT members be boycotting the Innsbruck meeting? At this stage I think the answer is 'no' though I realise not all will agree. Two of the major responsibilities of a university must be to oppose all forms of bigotry and extremism and at the same time to foster the spread of knowledge beyond national boundaries. Other agencies may achieve the same ends. There are few examples of non-university agencies that have been more successful in the medical field than EBMT. It was founded in the early 1970s. It has convincingly risen above national chauvinism to create a truly international body. It now flourishes as a model of cordial and altruistic collaboration between researchers from more than 40 countries. It dem-

onstrates that representatives of different nations can work together for the common good. It can be justly proud of its achievements and can hope to expand its influence in the 21st century.

It will always be incumbent on members of the academic community to condemn political extremism in any form. Many EBMT members must be suspicious or downright critical of the intentions of the Austrian Freedom party, but the proposal to boycott the Innsbruck meeting in an effort to ostracise Austria is probably premature. Instead attempts must still be made to keep Austria within the European community and a boycott at this stage would do more harm to EBMT, the very agency that has done so much to unite haematologists in Europe.

EBMT may look back on important political as well as scientific achievements. It must develop mechanisms that allow it to focus on national policies in relation to health care delivery and broader issues. It must not take steps that may prove more harmful to itself than to the institutions it seeks to censure.

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References

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