

OLD WORLD

Sanity Restored

from our Soviet Correspondent

THE release last week of the geneticist Zhores Medvedev from the Kaluga mental hospital where he has been confined "for observation" is a rare and in many ways unprecedented concession by the Soviet authorities, who have yielded to a flood of protests from scientists and academicians in the Soviet Union.

Medvedev's release followed upon a confrontation between members of the Academy and government officials. Those present at the meeting included the Minister of Health, Petrovskii, a government psychiatrist, Dr Morozov, who, like Professor Lunts in the case of Major General Grigorenko, seems to specialize in cases of political maladjustment, and Mstislav Keldysh, President of the Academy. It is interesting to recall that Keldysh, originally a political and military figure from the Soviet space programme, in his capacity as President of the Academy presided over the fateful general meeting in 1964 when a new outbreak of the Lysenko controversy was sparked off by the opposition of Medvedev's colleague Engelhardt and of the physicist Andrei Sakharov to the election of the Lysenkoist biologist Nikolai Nuzhdin to the Academy. As described by Medvedev in his book, *The Rise and Fall of T. D. Lysenko*, Keldysh appears to have taken a non-committal or even slightly pro-Lysenko line in the debate.

As a result of last week's confrontation, Dr Morozov announced that, in his opinion, Medvedev was suffering from "pathological psychopathy"—a meaningless diagnosis, recalling that of the "schizoheterodoxy" pronounced by Lunts upon one of the Moscow demonstrators against Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The release of Medvedev as a result of the protests by his Soviet colleagues, which were echoed throughout the world, is a notable event, even if some less happy undertones remain. The present official views in the Soviet Union on politics and mental health are far from reassuring. The novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for example, who was expelled last November from the Soviet Union of Writers, described the official reasoning as follows: "It is precisely on account of the diversity of his (Medvedev's) gifts that he has been charged with abnormality: a split personality. It is precisely his sensitivity to injustice and (official) stupidity that is construed as a delusion of his illness: 'a poor adjustment to the social milieu'! Once you fail to think as you are ordered to think, you are abnormal! Well-adjusted people all think alike!"

Medvedev's freedom may be short lived, since re-arrest and recommittal after a temporary release are all too frequent. And those released from mental hospitals, particularly after "disorders" of political thinking, have their internal passports specially endorsed, as if they were ex-prisoners. Movement within the Soviet Union becomes difficult, and travel abroad is almost impossible. The rights that Medvedev has campaigned for, freedom of travel within the Union, the lifting of internal passport and censorship restrictions, and free communication with colleagues abroad, have in no way been guaranteed by his release from hospital.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

SRC Comes Nearly Clean

THE Science Research Council, which distributes the financial support for a large part of the fundamental science and technology in British universities, is to be congratulated on a welcome move away from the obsessive secrecy which afflicts much of the government of British science. In a pamphlet published last week, the SRC at last sets out in some detail its policy of concentrating expenditure more heavily into areas where the council feels the payoff will be greatest and into the groups which are thought to be the most competent (*Selectivity and Concentration in Support of Research*, available from the Science Research Council). This is the policy which has its most notable expression in the way that the expensive paraphernalia of radio astronomy are to all intents and purposes provided only to the universities of Cambridge and Manchester.

Finding itself faced with the alternatives either of increasing selectivity in what projects it supports, or of continuing to spread its support evenly and thinly, the council has rightly opted for selectivity. This was first spelt out in detail in a lecture at Nottingham University last March by the chairman of the Science Research Council, Sir Brian Flowers, and the pamphlet repeats much of what he had to say then. But it has obviously not escaped the notice of the council that the wholesale application of its policy without an explanation of what is going on would be to invite suspicion from those who have not been favoured. This, no doubt, is part of the reason for the new pamphlet.

The most important part of the pamphlet is the statement of the principles which will govern the council's policy. It is particularly important, for example, that the council has agreed to take steps to see that the pattern of favoured areas of research and university departments does not become fossilized. The council has promised to keep its favourites under continuous review. It is also right that the council has promised that it will always support outstanding individuals "in any part of any subject for work of sufficient 'timeliness and promise' (for example, imagination, novelty or relevance to valuable aim)".

Less satisfactory is the remainder of the pamphlet which deals with how the policy is progressing. This gives a brief account of how the SRC and its predecessor, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, has been tending to concentrate its resources since the early sixties. Recent expressions of the principle have been the way three centres of control engineering have been set up at Cambridge, Imperial College and Manchester, and in the way that topics such as enzymes, polymers and possibly organometallic chemistry have been singled out for extra support. In polymer science the SRC this week announced grants of between £65,000 and £91,000 to five centres, at Manchester, Liverpool, Queen Mary College and Imperial College (London), and at Glasgow where there is a joint programme between Glasgow and Strathclyde universities.

As the pamphlet points out, the need for selectivity and concentration is particularly pronounced in the expensive activities which come under the Nuclear Physics Board and the Astronomy, Space and Radio Board of the SRC. But it is a shame that the council felt unable to say more about the review of the support