

# CORRESPONDENCE

## Doomsday Syndrome

SIR,—John Maddox's address to Section X of the British Association (*Nature*, 233, 15; 1971) shows him giving reasonable voice to the backlash against the "doomsday syndrome". He will find a warm welcome in many quarters for his suggestion that the whole thing has been a "wave of fashion". But there are some dangers in this particular role, and I would like to comment on them, in the light of my experience as the junior minister in the Labour government most concerned with environmental control.

Two phrases in the extract from Mr Maddox's address define his position. Talking about carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the possible "greenhouse effect", he says: "In reality, nobody can be sure that the effect will be as predicted, and in any case the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is by no means the inexorable process that the doomsday men suggest. Other recent fears . . . are similarly unfounded."

Now to begin with, Mr Maddox implies that because nobody can be sure there will be a greenhouse effect, we ought all to forget about it. It seems to me that the contrary view is more rational, certainly more prudent; that we ought not to forget about it because nobody can be sure there will not be a greenhouse effect.

Nevertheless, Mr Maddox does not assert that the prediction is unfounded. But he does immediately go on to say that other fears are *similarly unfounded*. Into the logical gap between the statement of uncertainty and the statement of certainty a host of special interests will leap. Some of the oil firms are currently engaged in just this bad logic over lead in petrol; their scientific spokesmen are virtually saying that because there are holes in the anti-lead argument, therefore lead does no harm. *Non sequitur*.

When we were assembling the information which enabled Harold Wilson to appoint the new Secretary of State and the Royal Commission on the Environment and the Holdgate Unit, I found this attitude was widely held and powerfully defended by the more hidebound civil servants, both scientific and administrative. It is still *very* well represented in Whitehall, particularly in the more production-oriented sections such as the Ministry of Agriculture, the Department of Trade and Industry, and the former Ministry of Transport.

Another quarter where Mr Maddox's stand will be welcomed is among the

already very powerful and well organized commercial interests whose testing and publication policy, as *Nature* has pointed out editorially before now, often leaves something to be desired.

To be sure the doomsday men and their disciples are overstating their cases; but this does not mean it is time for a general backtrack on the public consciousness and the legal and administrative measures of the last few years. The slogan "guilty until proved innocent" is no doubt a perfectionist one about new substances coming into use. But I would far sooner those in authority had it at the back of their minds than Mr Maddox's "other recent fears are similarly unfounded". It is the sounder slogan not only on ecological grounds, but on economic ones too: the true costs of a product, including certain, probable, and possible social costs, should be known before the product is marketed, so that they can be included in the price.

Yours faithfully,

WAYLAND KENNET

*House of Lords*

## Working Europeans

SIR,—While I have full sympathy with the tenor of your editorial (*Nature*, 233, 152; 1971), I should like to suggest that a good deal more could be done through efforts of individual scientists in responsible positions, such as heads of departments or institutes. It is not really necessary to wait patiently till official agencies produce collaboration for us like a rabbit out of a hat. "When," you ask, "will the British Government agree that the Agricultural Research Council . . . should employ scientists from France or the Netherlands?" There is nothing now to stop them employing foreign nationals as research assistants at quite high salaries. In my department we had for some years a Swiss biologist whose salary was paid by the ARC, and we now have an Italian whose salary comes from the SRC. Both of these were on relatively short-term grants lasting only a few years, but we also have a Swiss citizen as a member of an MRC group, with a long term commitment. Again there is nothing to prevent integration at the level of university departments, at least at postgraduate level, where it is probably likely to be most useful. We have operated for the past few years an Anglo-Italian postgraduate course in epigenetics, with lecturing and laboratory

work contributed jointly by our university staff and staff of the Laboratory for Molecular Embryology at Naples. The latter is funded by the Italian Council for Scientific Research, who have shown themselves very willing to meet the expenses of moving their teachers to Edinburgh and accommodating the students in Naples. The expenses on the British side, over and above the normal university contribution, are, it must be admitted, provided not by any governmental agency, but by the Leverhulme Trust. Such funds do, of course, have to be looked for. But they exist, and collaboration, at this perhaps rather minor level, can be what the Americans would call a grass-roots operation.

Finally, is there anything, except timidity, which stands in the way of the suggestion, which I have been urging for some years, that the research councils should appoint, to their main working committee which vets grant applications, one or two non-British European scientists? Some of us who find ourselves faced with steering the projects of our staff through committees of their colleague-rivals would welcome the judgment of respected outside opinion; and Europeans privileged to serve on such committees would gain valuable experience of how the really rather effective British system works.

Yours faithfully,

C. H. WADDINGTON

*Institute of Animal Genetics,  
West Mains Road,  
Edinburgh EH9 3JN*

## Research Associations

SIR,—I wholeheartedly endorse the letter of Mr Jobling (*Nature*, 231, 477; 1971). The problems of research associations are similar in all countries and the same errors are being made in many places. My experience suggests that it is completely wrong to want the RAs to be commercially viable, because the services they render are for the most part of a general character and the earnings following from these are mostly invisible. As a typical example I would single out the laundry and dry-cleaning industries, which comprise almost exclusively small or very small firms. What they need is independent information on new products and machines, relevant abstracts from the literature, control of their technical and commercial operations and statistics. Such services may be vital to a firm and save it from bankruptcy, but in the