

CORRESPONDENCE

British Astronomy

SIR,—As a result of the vagaries in the transatlantic mail, I have only just seen the remarkable letter by Geoff Burbidge on British optical astronomy (*Nature*, **239**, 117; 1972). I should like to endorse everything said in that letter; at last somebody has had the courage to publish the truth on the lamentable state of this subject in Britain. The situation has been fairly obvious for years but too many of us have lacked the guts to say so for fear of upsetting an apple cart which has in fact been stuck in a mire of shortsightedness and national self-satisfaction for the last half century. British optical astronomers must judge and be judged on an international scale. On this scale, Britain has undoubtedly been getting a very poor return for money invested in the field and no excuses or rationalizations (for example, poor weather) can alter the fact.

Clearly this situation cannot be allowed to continue. One solution would be to get out of optical astronomy altogether and to close down existing observatories. In my opinion this would be wrong, at least until alternatives have been tried. In the foreseeable future astrophysics will be one of the most exciting and productive areas of physical research. It is also probably true that optical astronomy will, for some time, be potentially able to deliver more information per unit investment in time and equipment than astronomy in other wavelength bands. (For example, the only reliable distance indicator for extragalactic objects is furnished by optical astronomy.) A viable optical astronomy programme is thus important if not vital for a healthy development in astrophysics. This point has been recognized by the Americans in setting up National Observatories at Kitt Peak and Cerro Tololo, by the Russians in building the 240 inch telescope at a site in the Caucasus Mountains and by various European countries in establishing the European Southern Observatory (ESO) in addition to their various national schemes. This point of view has also been accepted by the SRC which has continued to provide adequate funds for optical astronomy. The main barrier to progress lies in the British astronomical establishment, both in its organization and in its membership. Only if both are changed drastically can British optical astronomy hope to make the grade internationally. Only then will Burbidge's catalogue of major mistakes come to an end.

Given that the sickness has at last

been recognized, what is required for a cure? First of all, a new National Centre must be set up along the lines recommended by the NHRC and should be responsible for building and running all overseas optical (and infrared) installations. The old observatories just will not do since their habits of inertia seem too deeply ingrained to change; they should be pruned, preferably sharply. (Some of your readers will no doubt be aware that the Germans have, in similar circumstances, adopted precisely such a policy in setting up the Max Planck Institut für Astronomie at Heidelberg.)

To ensure rapid progress, the new Centre must be staffed with demonstrably successful astronomers even if this inevitably means recruiting from overseas, at least initially. Decent observing facilities of proven design must be set up as soon as possible at a site of established quality. This means appointing a project manager with full responsibility for the scheme and an end to the practice of eternal consultations with everybody. Allocation of observing time and funding of research proposals should be much more competitive and preferably subject to review by international experts. Results should be the only criterion, not accent, origin or some long standing tradition. Above all, good leadership is required if a revival in optical astronomy is to take place. In this respect the recent return to England of Geoff and Margaret Burbidge augurs well. Together they constitute one of the most successful research teams in astronomy today. Given the support both of British astronomers and of the SRC they stand an excellent chance of revitalizing the British astronomical scene. Having worked with them in the US I should, however, emphasize that their overriding interest is in obtaining astronomical results and that if continued attempts are made to frustrate their efforts (particularly in the name of the "British way of doing things") I, for one, doubt that they will stay for long.

The time has obviously come for the British to decide whether they are serious about optical astronomy and, if so, to insist on a new, more cooperative and more outward looking way of proceeding. If not, they might as well get out of the field altogether and save themselves a considerable amount of money and ridicule.

Yours faithfully,

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Katchalsky

SIR,—The creation of an international Katchalsky fellowship has been criticized by some of your correspondents who state that this would provide moral support for the Israeli government (*Nature*, **238**, 236; 1972). It is not our intention to discuss politics in *Nature* but we feel obliged to reply on behalf of the memory of the scientist and humanist Aharon Katchalsky.

It is evident that the choice of any country on Earth for the location of an international institution has some political implication. But there is indeed no government that could not be criticized and condemned by some scientists for some aspects of its politics: the United States for the Vietnam war, the Soviet Union for the invasion in Czechoslovakia, France for the Algerian war, and so on . . . If military affairs were sufficient to prevent the establishment of international scientific institutions in a country, the only place of choice would be another planet. Once it is recognized that there is necessity for science on Earth, political considerations should never be a reason for exclusion of the scientists of any country from the international scientific community. One of the results of such a discriminatory and unscientific attitude can be seen in the manner your two correspondents treat historical information. For instance, they try to link Katchalsky as a former leader of the Hagannah to Deir Yassin and other Arab-Israeli hostilities. In reality, Deir Yassin was the act of some men of the Irgoun group. The Hagannah fought this group and the Irgoun terrorists responsible for Deir Yassin were prosecuted.

The efforts of many scientists who, like Katchalsky, stand up for humanity and against wars should not be undermined by distortions and the request to boycott the scientists of a particular nation.

Yours faithfully,

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Science and Politics

SIR,—I wish to reply to the letter of Cohen *et al.* (*Nature*, **237**, 469; 1972) regarding NATO sponsorship of an Advanced Study Institute on proteins of