

# correspondence

## Victimisation

SIR,—What Professor Burhop in effect is saying (*Nature*, August 9) is that the "Declaration on the Rights of Scientists", made by the World Federation of Scientific Workers in 1969, is really no more than an expression of pious hopes, since there is nothing that can be done about victimisation by governments, left, right, or centre, if the governments responsible are themselves disinclined to cooperate.

As President of the W.F.S.W., Professor Burhop is no doubt well placed to judge of this. But when he goes on to say that "... the close contacts maintained between our affiliated organisations in different countries are beneficial to scientists and for science itself", one wonders whether there might not be long-term benefits for science and scientists in particular countries, if the W.F.S.W. were to make it clear that although "Our aim must be to strengthen these contacts", that policy would have to be applied selectively, where there was reason to believe that the "Declaration" was not being adhered to by the governments or affiliated organisations concerned.

Yours faithfully,

C. B. GOODHART

Cambridge, UK

## Plasmid engineering

SIR,—The appeal by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences for restraint with respect to certain types of genetic experiment (*Nature*, July 19) deserves the generally favourable response accorded it (*Nature*, July 26). The potential hazards associated with the creation of artificial recombinant DNA molecules are clearly outlined in the committee's statement. However, there is an unfortunate lack of clarity in defining the types of experiment which it is recommended should be deferred. The statement concerning experiments of type I is confusing. This is particularly so if one does not persevere to the last three lines of the inordinately long sentence which excludes "plasmids containing such combinations of antibiotic resistance determinants (which) already exist in nature." The hazards associated with these latter plasmids are not potential but have already been amply demonstrated and are well understood, as explained by Dr Anderson. The NAS committee's recommendation is concerned with unnatural recombinant plasmids and it would be unfortunate if, as seems likely from parts of Dr Anderson's comment,

the lack of clarity in the definition of experiments of type I led to the inclusion in the recommended ban of experiments concerned, not with future potential hazards, but with those already with us and in need of attention.

Much work is in progress, including my own, with the specific objective of seeking means for the effective elimination of plasmids from bacteria. It would be against the spirit of the NAS committee's aims if misinterpretation of the nature of experiments of type I brought to a halt, even temporarily, experiments carrying no potential hazard from new recombinant DNA molecules, but concerned with already existing hazards in clinical practice and animal husbandry.

Yours faithfully,

G. R. BARKER

Manchester, UK

## Scientists don't move

SIR,—Your editorial of July 26 on Sir Hermann Bondi's report on the interchange of scientists was very critical of the lack of mobility of scientists, and could scarcely believe that they are inhibited from changing jobs because of the difficulty of moving house. My recent experiences may help you to understand the problems.

Last December I moved from a civil service post in Farnborough to a research fellowship at Leicester University. It took the Civil Service Department over four months to determine the transfer value of my pension, but this was certainly no obstacle to me. Indeed I think that the preservation or transferability of pension rights is of little concern to the young scientist contemplating a move. My new employers seem to be unusually generous by contemporary standards in that they reimbursed a large part of my "removal expenses" and also provided a small second mortgage loan at low interest rate. Even so we have been faced with unreimbursable expenses in the present dormant housing market of more than £2,000—probably nearer £3,000 by the time the flat is sold.

My present contract lasts for only three years, and, with the present tendency of university science departments to contract, it is entirely possible that I shall have to move again in 2½ years' time, with, no doubt, a repetition of these expenses.

In North America or any other country of Western Europe, people

in our position find it quite natural to rent a house for a few years; here it is impossible to find unfurnished accommodation. Even worse, the 1974 Rent Act, by giving security of tenure to furnished tenants as well, has made us abandon any idea of letting our empty flat in this way. It seems to be the policy of both major parties that every family should either own its own home or be a council tenant, but there can be little doubt of the severe effects of this policy on the mobility of all labour, and not just scientists.

While I have no regrets at the change in my working environment which I have bought at the price, perhaps, of two years' salary, I feel unable to criticize the many scientists who do not choose to follow my example. They too may count the cost, and they may feel that boldness in pushing back frontiers is not incompatible with financial solvency.

Yours faithfully,

C. G. PAGE

Leicester, UK

## Collecting egg-whites

W. R. P. BOURNE (*Nature*, 249, 793; 1974), seems determined to continue to hound Professor Charles Sibley for his comparatively minor indiscretion (with the connivance of others) in obtaining the eggs of certain birds unlawfully.

Professor Sibley is not, and never has been, an egg collector in the accepted sense as the title of Bourne's article suggests. Indeed his interest in eggs has been confined to the analysis of egg-white protein and the taxonomic value of such analysis as far as avian relationships are concerned.

Whatever the final results of Professor Sibley's researches may be, it is certain that they will be studied by all who are interested in the many unsatisfactory aspects of the classification of birds, typified, for instance, by the Babblers (Timaliidae), for too long the despair of orthodox systematists.

R. WAGSTAFFE

Bluntisham, Huntingdon, UK

## How many deer?

SIR,—How many deer have been 'sacrificed' (which is, I believe, the correct scientific term) in order to provide linings for "attractive space-saving files for your *Nature* . . . beautifully labelled"?

Yours faithfully,

Hove, UK

B. JOVE