

# correspondence

## Moon

SIR,—One must assume that at the beginning of each year the Editor of *Nature* writes in his diary, in the appropriate place, "Be sure to include an article designed to discourage readers from attending the International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences". Having attended last year's ICUS conference, I can vouch for the fact that the majority of the eminent names mentioned in the advance publicity did in fact attend the conference and make contributions. As far as I am aware, no-one present was dissatisfied at the proceedings, and at the end I was left with the impression that the conference had succeeded in achieving the aim of any conference, namely of allowing free exchange of ideas on important topics.

Regarding the sponsorship of the conference, from his opening address I gained the impression that at any rate some of the Rev. Moon's motives are at least as worthy as those of such well known conference sponsors as the armed forces. As to the rest, news (as reported by you) is capable of being distorted in many ways, but whatever the true situation may be, I find it difficult to accept from a reputable scientific journal something which one cannot interpret as anything other than a deliberate attempt, for ideological reasons, to sabotage a conference by discouraging potential participants from attending.

Yours faithfully,

B. D. JOSEPHSON

Cambridge, UK

## Silly in the head

SIR,—Regarding the "silly season for newspapers" as discussed in *Nature* (August 28), how about the headline for a recent Independent Television News at Ten—"British scientists discover origin of Universe"?

Yours faithfully,

JOHN WOODSIDE

Cambridge, UK

SIR,—Herewith some suggestions for your silly headlines list:

Britain fastest in entropy acceleration studies—official  
Plutonium for Arabs in genetic manipulation research deal  
Pugwash scientists named in SALT talks sell-out allegations  
Ice-age predictions snowball as funds frozen

*Nature* readers in shock titles scandal  
—alleges Longford

Yours faithfully,

BERNARD MEARES

Copenhagen, Denmark

## Stop metrication

SIR,—On August 28 you referred to the pointless advance of metrication. There is one area where good sense has a foothold, even in France. Whether in Notre Dame or the humblest village church, organ pipes are still measured in feet. I could not think of foundation stops of 2.4 m or adding the brilliance of a 0.3 m rank.

Common sense still prevails over logic in one area—I am sure that there must be others.

D. C. HARDWICK

London, UK



## CAB directors

SIR,—It is unfortunate that your correspondent in his article on the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux (August 14) spoiled an otherwise factual and informative piece by an inclusion of quite unmerited criticism of CAB directors.

As your correspondent says "the bureaux have maintained and justified their reputation for providing the world's best and most comprehensive source of information in the fields they cover". The reputation has been gained not by the central management but by the individual bureaux under the management of the directors. That changes are needed to modernise the bureaux structure is acknowledged by the staff, and the Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS) has put forward on their behalf proposals which we hope the CAB management will adopt but which will be rather

different from those proposed by the Civil Service Department review team.

The CSD review team made recommendations which implied criticism of the central management rather than of the staff or the directors of bureaux. The misuse of computer printing, resulting in an increase in the time taken to publish abstracts as compared with the time when directors were completely responsible for publication, is an example. Clearly there is room for improvement in the management of computer services. Certainly to the extent that it is possible, collaboration with other agencies doing similar work is desirable. But your correspondent is wrong in assuming that there is not already collaboration with AGRIS; the bureaux already scan UK journals for AGRIS and make no charge for this service.

The report of the review team stress on the economies in staffing which would result from operating the abstracting and editorial services on a commercial basis. We believe that this could be achieved only by lowering the standards of the service and this would seriously reduce its value to its users. An important feature of the CAB service is its abstract enrichment and this could not be maintained if commercial viability were the first consideration. The review team made no attempt to test its assumptions by market survey. Enquiries we have made from a necessarily small sample of eminent scientists in the agricultural field have all met with the response that the CAB abstracts must be maintained at their present high quality if they are to be of value. By all means let us have additional effort to market the CAB's products (and the staff will not be greatly concerned whether this job is described as "marketing" or "circulation and services") but the article for sale must be first class.

Whatever changes are made in procedures and staff structures they will be successful only if they have the whole-hearted cooperation of the staff. A lowering of standards would lead to loss of job satisfaction for the staff and a drop in morale. Staff morale will not be improved by suggestions such as those made by your correspondent that the staff are responsible for the difficulties which are solely attributable to bad management.

EDWARD HEWLETT

IPCS, London, UK