

nature

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Human rights and the scientist

'SCHOLARS of all kinds continue to be oppressed and persecuted in many parts of our contemporary world, and concerted attempts to impede their enquiries and suppress their conclusions are as common today as at any time in the past'. So begins a newly published report *Scholarly Freedom and Human Rights* (Barry Rose Publishers Ltd, £2.25) by a study group of the Council for Science and Society in collaboration with the British Institute for Human Rights. No documentation is given for the statement; indeed, the group has deliberately avoided quoting examples, but anyone with a mite of political awareness will know exactly what they are talking about and also that oppression is not restricted to any particular part of the world.

The central theses of the report are two: that there is a substantial body of international human rights law which should be adequate to cope with the sort of violations that are depressingly familiar; and that scientists, depending so much on communication, are peculiarly prone to what may seem to others to be minor constraints or irritations. Isolate an accountant from the literature and from his colleagues for a few years and afterwards he could soon pick up the threads of his profession; do the same to a scientist and his whole career may be ruined and others' impoverished.

The human rights legislation that has accumulated since the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is extensive, and the report provides a valuable guide. Of central interest to scientists are assertions such as that of the United Nations Declaration: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' The problems, however, arise in the qualifications. The United Nations Declaration is only proclaimed as a 'common standard of achievement'—highly desirable but not legally binding. A document which binds its members and which provides a mechanism for redress—the European Convention on Human Rights—says almost the same thing, but it then goes on to add 'the exercise of these freedoms . . . may be subject to [legal and democratic] restrictions . . . in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary'.

Some of these restrictions, the report points out, do no more than prevent anyone who does things like shout 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre from avoiding the legal consequences by claiming freedom of expression. But there are plenty of murky areas connected with 'national security', 'protection of morals' and so on, and it is a disappointment that the study group, having noted these areas, did not pause at such a point and devote rather more than three paragraphs to a discussion of the subject. Also, having drawn attention to differences in priorities between countries operating different economic systems, the group could well have elaborated rather more on the problems of misunderstanding between countries which rate civil rights high but give less guarantee of economic benefits and those which have an opposite order of priorities. There is one paragraph in the report in which it suddenly seems possible that this question will be analysed in depth, but the opportunity is passed over.

But what should scientists do when they hear of violations of human rights? We have not just an internationally accepted right to protest, says the report, but a duty to do so, and in a public way both individually and through organisations such as learned societies. Private persuasion is allowed its place but the major sanction 'must always be that of public protest'. The clear intention of the report thus emerges in its last few pages—bodies such as the Royal Society have no business steering clear of public pronouncements on the oppression of scientists.

Not for the first time, however, the Council for Science and Society has almost predetermined the conclusions of a study group by its choice of membership of that group. We greatly admire the vigour of John Ziman, convener of the group, and the integrity of its members—though it hardly seemed necessary for them to write that they all 'share a high degree of commitment to the ideal of the relentless and objective search for knowledge, wherever it may lead'. But was the outcome ever in doubt? Professor Ziman's views are well known on the subject of Royal Society intervention, and this makes the report's conclusions seem less weighty than they would have been had the Council gone to someone less committed to convene the group. The excellence of the sections on human rights law and on the needs of scientists remains undiminished. They should be widely read, and the hope must be that the document will have some effect. But its conclusions, put together a little skimpily as if they were self-evident, lack the corresponding weight. □