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# Reagan's mistake on Soviet sanctions

*The US Administration, seeking to punish the Soviet Union for what is happening in Poland by suspending an exchange agreement, has revealed its ignorance of what science is for.*

Towards the end of the Napoleonic wars, Sir Humphry Davy went on a journey on the European mainland untrammelled by the circumstance that Britain was literally at war with France (and that most other European states were at war with at least one other). The journey, frequently described as an illustration of how even then the international interests of science took precedence over international politics, is made still more pointed by the knowledge that Davy was combining business with pleasure — his honeymoon. Personal travel and national hostilities were, it seems, independent of each other. Now all that has changed. President Ronald Reagan's suspension last week of the exchange agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, part of his programme of sanctions against the Soviet Union in response to the supposed Soviet support of martial law in Poland, will effectively put latter-day Davys in their place. It is also a stupid and a dangerous move. It should be quietly abandoned.

Programmes of economic and cultural sanctions have been frequently tested in the years since the Second World War, and have as frequently been found wanting. The best thing to be said about them is that they are less damaging than outright warfare. They are also, usually, ineffectual, as President Carter found after Afghanistan. On this occasion, the difference of opinion between some Western European governments and the United States on the wisdom of sanctions as a means of interdiction will further undermine what President Reagan can hope to achieve — which by all accounts (see page 3) is not in any case very much. It is however clear that neither he nor his advisers appreciate the enormity of including within a set of sanctions the suspension of a longstanding programme for the exchange of academic scientists between one country and another.

This is why. Open warfare is a means by which one nation state can legitimately (*pace* the pacifists) enforce its will on another. Even nations that unfashionably declare war on others usually express their hope that in due course all will again be sweetness and light. Programmes of sanctions, damage-limiting though they may be, also anticipate the earlier return of normalcy. So sanctions should be designed to maximize the short-term damage done but to create as few impediments as possible for the hopefully happy years ahead. Denying the Soviet Union the right to buy pipe-laying machines in Texas is unambiguously in the former category, suspending the exchange agreements unfortunately in the latter.

That there should have to be formal schemes for enabling scientists from one country to work, if they wish, in laboratories in another is, of course, in itself a mark of failure. If Dr X should wish to work in Dr Y's laboratory and Dr Y should be agreeable, and if one or other should be able to find the necessary funds, why should governments be involved? People like Mr Frank Carlucci, Deputy Secretary at the Pentagon, think they know why not: if Dr X is a Soviet citizen, he will be part of a "highly orchestrated, centrally directed" effort to pick the brains of unsuspecting American scientists. Mr Carlucci is naturally right to say that Soviet participants in the bilateral exchange agreement benefit from their visits to the United States, and are afterwards potentially more useful as applied scientists, sometimes in military programmes. But is there any evidence that their American hosts, the Dr Ys of this world, are entirely without

benefit? If so, the exchange programme has been maladministered — visitors have been foisted on unwilling hosts. If not, Mr Carlucci should embark on what would be called an evaluation of the benefits and disbenefits of the exchange programme. He would come to two conclusions — first, that the total benefit from mutually sought exchanges for the research enterprise is greater than the sum of the individual benefits and, second, that his government's proper course of action, as a signatory of the Helsinki accords, is to insist that the agreement, at least in principle, that people should be more or less free to move to where their inclinations take them, should be honoured.

That, unfortunately, will seem too abstract a course to the Reagans and Carluccis of this world. The Soviets *are* benefiting, and must be prevented from doing so, they will say. And we know that Helsinki doesn't work, don't we? That, of course is true, even if the statement of the truth comes oddly from the inheritors of those who negotiated the agreement. But the reasons why Helsinki has failed in respect of scientific exchanges need more careful consideration. The objective now should be to restore some semblance of the *laissez-faire* of Humphry Davy's time. The only way of doing that is to shift responsibility for the administration of exchanges from the State Department (and the Pentagon) to some convenient halfway house such as the National Academy of Sciences. That stratagem has been adopted elsewhere, even in backward Britain. Perhaps the time has come when the National Academy of Sciences in Washington should insist that no other body, not even the State Department, can do what is required. If necessary, it should be prepared to raise the funds required privately, from the foundations and from industry.

## More change now due

*Reform of the British research council system is overdue. Does the government have time?*

The British government has mostly done the decent thing in its dealings with the publicly-supported research councils. Broadly speaking, their budgets for the financial year beginning on 1 April are unchanged (see page 4). So the Prime Minister will be able to tell the British electorate at the next general election, some time before 3 May 1984, that she has "protected" publicly-supported civil science from damaging economies. On present form, the government may have very little else to boast about at the end of what is almost certainly its last full financial year in office. But this is not a vote-catching issue. Thus the government's generosity towards the research councils — a curious description of a recipe for continued stagnation, but appropriate in the circumstances — must be taken as deliberate. Will it therefore, in the remainder of its time in office, put in hand the structural reforms of the mechanisms for supporting the five research councils that are now long overdue?

The research councils are inevitably a mixed bunch. But even those with responsibilities for fostering basic research in fields such as medicine or agriculture are important sources of support for university research. The Science and Engineering Research