London and Moscow in hassle

Huxley attacks Soviets on civil rights

A complaint by the Royal Society about the treatment of Soviet scientists by their government has been delivered to the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, and the reply has fallen "far short" of what was promised, and hoped for. This was the most arresting message in the anniversary address to the Royal Society, delivered by Sir Andrew Huxley, the president, last Tuesday. While Sir Andrew reaffirmed his adherence to the society's view that scientists who break their countries' laws are just as liable to punishment on that account as are other citizens, his decision to make public the Royal Society's dissatisfaction with its enquiries of Soviet scientists is a break with precedent and recent practice.

The exchange between the two academies apparently began in May this year, when a Soviet delegation visited the United Kingdom. Sir Andrew explained this week that while not wishing "to sacrifice international cooperation between individual scientists in the hope of persuading the government of another country to change its internal policies", oppressive treatment of scientists by the Soviet government was already "harming scientific interchange" with Britain.

By way of illustration, Sir Andrew said that the funds available each year for exchanges with the Soviet Union are not fully taken up, partly because British scientists are unwilling "to spend time in the USSR because of the oppression in that country of dissident scientists, the refusal of permission to Jewish scientists to emigrate to Israel and recently the revoking of the academic degrees of certain individuals".

The meeting with the Soviet delegation in May this year seems to have been turbulent. Sir Andrew said this week that "we took this opportunity of putting this point forcefully to them". By his account, the Soviet delegation, emphasizing that the Academy of Sciences was not responsible, offered to investigate any cases the Royal Society cared to specify in detail, and to report. The Royal Society then apparently wrote with details of twenty-one Soviet scientists in trouble — seventeen who were being "subjected to various forms of punishment", five refusniks and three who had been prevented from attending scientific meetings in the United Kingdom. The reply from Moscow appears to have arrived only early in November, and to have been unsatisfactory. "Seventeen of the twenty-one scientists named in our letter are not even mentioned, and I take

this as a tacit admission that in most or all of these cases there is no respectable excuse that can be put forward as justification of the treatment they have been given."

Huxley went on to say that he finds it "difficult to accept" the explanation given for the treatment of Aleksander Lerner, who has been refused permission to emigrate to Israel; can "reasons of national security, including knowledge of classified and defence material", apply to one dismissed from his post at the institute of control sciences in Moscow eleven years ago? The Soviet academy also says that V. Kislik is imprisoned for "petty crimes" without saying why he has been deprived of his degrees, and that Y. Orlov is imprisoned for having damaged the Soviet Union politically.

The case of Andrei Sakharov seems, however, to have been the most serious bone of contention. Sir Andrew said that the Royal Society's letter complained that Sakharov was being "persecuted for his work in defence of human rights", and

went on to say that nobody denied that he had criticized restrictions of individual freedom in the Soviet Union, published writing abroad and yet been allowed to remain a member of the Soviet academy.

The Soviet academy's reply seems to have been a deliberate misreading of the complaint. Sakharov's exile to Gork'i is said to be "comparatively mild" in relation to "his actions, which had the aspect of being crimes against the state". Huxley says that the Soviet reply on Sakharov emphasized his dissent from Soviet policies on arms control whereas "most in the West" consider that the "real reason" for his exile is his criticisms of "the illiberal internal regime in the USSR".

Huxley concluded his address by saying that his decision "to express publicly my own feelings" is to be taken as a definition of his position, but that he would not wish to curtail the exchange of scientists between the two countries or restrict visas "to *bona fide* scientists wishing to attend international meetings". ●

French university lecturers protest

Hundreds of French university lecturers marched from the Sorbonne in the centre of Paris to the ministry of national education last Friday, in protest against what they see as a complete abandonment by the minister, M. Alain Savary of any serious — and socialist — reform of the university system.

Much had been — and is — expected of Savary's "law for higher education" to be put before parliament by the end of the year, but the higher education trades unions have not been much impressed so far. Hence the strike.

Backing for the union view, however, may not be particularly strong. A few hundred demonstrators are only a small part of the 44,000-strong community of university teachers, and the union demands for a single kind of lecturer (including professor), with promotion by seniority are seen as unrealistic in many quarters.

Nevertheless the outburst of grievances among the unions has a substantial basis — the enormous blockage of posts within the universities, which according to ministry calculations will see only 158 retirements next year, one third of one per cent of the staff. Thus a common international problem among universities is gravely exaggerated in France, because of a peak in the recruitment of staff in the late 1960s, before and after the "troubles" of 1968.

Moreover, this tinder-box situation has been aggravated by some expectation of relief, after the savage activities of the previous, Giscardian, minister of the universities. But Savary is offering little or no relief, and indeed is piling on the pressure with a reduction in part-time teaching allocations, a lengthening of the

university year, and an insistence that since university staff are civil servants, they must take no more than five weeks' holiday. The number of students would also increase from its present 800,000 to 1 million, said the minister.

Recently the minister further announced to the unions that their dream of a single category of lecturers was unattainable, and that there would instead be a system much like the present, with effectively lecturers, senior lecturers and professors with appointments between grades determined by peer review. That was the last straw, and led the left-wing unions to the strike.

Now, however, the ministry is suggesting that "new propositions" will be made within a couple of weeks — apparently opening all options once more.

This seems to leave the preparation for a new higher education law, one to replace the somewhat rushed law of 1968, in an utter shambles. So many interest groups are at work that it is little wonder that the French education system is sometimes described as the largest political system outside the Red Army.

Moreover, there is a further muddle ahead: the question of appointments and promotions for 1983, previously fixed in late December and early January by the Conseil Supérieur des Corps Universitaires (CSCU), a giant partially-elected parliament of specialist committees. Savary dissolved the previous CSCU, a product of the previous government, a year ago. But this year, without an election policy, each committee has had to be filled by a lottery. It is hoped that the promotions will not be equally random.

Robert Walgate