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REGULATION AND RESTRAINT IN CONTEMPORARY MEDICINE IN THE UK AND USA

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Presenting the edited proceedings of an Anglo-American conference, held in October 1981, this book examines in detail the increasing regulatory pressures placed upon medical practice and research both from inside and outside of the profession. These pressures have led to a conflicting array of self-imposed as well as legally imposed constraints, and the contributors discuss here their desirability for both the patient and the profession.

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Blood and thunder

Tam Dalyell

Partial Progress: The Politics of Science and Technology.

By David Albury and Joseph Schwartz.
Pluto: 1982. Pp.215; £4.95. \$??.

Partial Progress is a polemic book. The central argument of the authors, David Albury and Joseph Schwartz, is that science and technology have been designed to serve particular purposes and reflect the interests of managers, employers and governments. Further, they seek to "demystify" the notion that the work of scientists and technologists has been inherently beneficial or morally neutral, and try to establish "rules to operate by when dealing with scientists". All this is stimulating reading, but I find myself provoked by some of the examples Albury and Schwartz have chosen and by the harshness of several of their judgements.

The authors say that, in the academic world, the budget cuts of the 1980s have been resolved entirely in favour of the new scientific managers, and assert that "the long eight-year apprenticeship starting with the three-year research studentship followed by a five-year post-doctoral fellowship" has led to no permanent job for almost one-third of the research work force. Assuredly, I agree that this is a most acute problem. Equally true is the contention that the place of the *unemployable* (author's italics) post-doctoral worker is taken by the next generation of "students". Albury and Schwartz, however, are intemperate in extending their argument: "The tenured professors continue to have a source of cheap labour for their labs and the whole revolving door is justified on the grounds that one needs 'fresh blood' to sustain a research programme". This last is a base accusation; it is simply not my experience in going around the institutions of higher education in Britain that the tortured souls who run departments — desperately worried about keeping a balanced age profile in their laboratories — are guilty of such a charge.

Albury and Schwartz attack the "fresh blood" argument for having served scientific managers and government administrators well, since, in justification of redundancies, they have been able to exploit the widely held belief that you have to be young to be productive in research. The opine that the level of political consciousness (and trade union organization) among the workforce was so low that the fresh blood argument passed unchallenged. According to the authors, the myth of the superior originality of young researchers began in the 1920s with the *Wunderkinder* — Pauli, Heisenberg and Dirac — involved in the creation of quantum mechanics and the dramatic new theory of the atom. The general situation,

however, is quite different. Elsevier's collection of Nobel Prize speeches has the relevant data: the average age of Nobel Prize winning physicists, *when they did their prize-winning work*, is 37 years old; in biology, it is 39 years old.

Rightly, in my view, the authors consider that the myth of youthful genius — and there is such a myth — obscures the fact that research is a collective process. True, some researchers were indeed very young when they did important work. Yet such youthful innovators were set to work on well-defined problems by those who were among the world's leading specialists in their field. Pauli, Heisenberg and Dirac all had the good fortune to work with Max Born at Gottingen, when he was in his late thirties, and an experienced member of the international community of atomic physics researchers. Later, when a teenager, I was to come to know Born and can easily understand how this marvellous old man could have been inspirational in his middle years. But I would like a better example than that of Born's relationship with Pauli, Heisenberg, and Dirac to convince me of Albury and Schwartz's conclusion that it is because of the myth of youthful genius, and despite changing working conditions and the threat of redundancy, that most scientists continue to see themselves as professionals.

Nor in my experience is it anything like the whole story to suggest that the response of scientists to changing conditions, and to the way that they are being treated is to say, "You cannot treat us like that. It is all very well for manual workers to be sacked at will, to be told how fast to work, what to do and so on, but we as scientists are different from that, we should not be treated like this". On the contrary, the reaction I have found about being forced into early retirement is one of, "Now we know what it is like for those who find themselves out of work, on the scrapheap, who were previously statistics to us". I do not think I am being unduly charitable. Rather I find that Albury and Schwartz have an excessively harsh view of the human qualities of their fellow scientists.

Finally, I cannot agree that it is because of their "training and class background" that scientists' attitudes towards their situation have not kept pace with their changed working conditions. But the authors are right to draw attention to the Association of University Teachers estimates that there are upwards of 2,500 scientists, all holders of doctorates, permanently out of work in Britain. This is truly a terrible indictment of the way in which the nation has contrived to manage its affairs. Despite exaggeration of their case, Albury and Schwartz deserve a wide audience. □

Tam Dalyell has been Member of Parliament for West Lothian since 1962. He was Shadow Spokesman on Science from 1980 to 1982, when he was dismissed over the Falklands issue.