

## Impaled on Morton's fork

*British archaeologists, bent on organizing a successful international conference next year, should have found a more honourable way out of their problem over South African apartheid.*

By the time this issue of *Nature* reaches its readers, the British National Committee of the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (IUPPS) will have made the most difficult decision ever to have come its way. For the best part of a year, the committee has been planning the 11th World Archaeological Congress, arranged for Southampton next September (see *Nature* 31 October, p. 754). Just two months ago the organizers found themselves in what they judged to be an impossible position. Local interests at Southampton had complained that they would boycott or even disrupt the congress if scientists from South Africa were allowed to attend. The committee seems to have spent the summer agonizing about the problem, and the obvious conflict there would be between a decision to give in to opponents of the conference and the ringing declaration of the parent body, IUPPS, there should be no discrimination in its proceedings on the grounds of "nationality, philosophical conviction or religious faith". The issue was further complicated by the circumstance that the chairman of the British organizing committee, Professor John Evans, is also president of IUPPS. But in the end, the organizers decided that they had better bow to pressure to disinvite South Africans. A note to that effect was included in the final version of the conference programme.

This week's meeting (on 20 November) has the unavoidable purpose of mulling over the damage that has been done to international scholarship, to the reputation of British academic institutions and, more practically, to the chances that the planned congress will be a success, financially as well as intellectually. There are three choices: to stand by the decisions already made, to go back on them (letting the opposition go hang) or to cancel the congress (perhaps in the hope that it might be possible to hold it elsewhere at some other time). It probably matters very little what the committee decides. Most of the damage has already been done.

The rights and wrongs of the underlying issue are widely understood. The South African system of apartheid, one of the few systems of racial discrimination enshrined in a nation's constitution, is wicked, and should be done away with. Most people agree with that. In the past few years, external pressure has helped to moderate the South African government's policies, and there is now a chance that further pressure will make the system of apartheid untenable. That proposition (or package of propositions) is less unanimously accepted. Plain speaking certainly helps. Economic sanctions have dubious direct effect, but may have symbolic value. The steps taken by the governments of the British Commonwealth under the Glencagles agreement to make it difficult for sportsmen who play games in South Africa then to play the same games for their own representative teams have been an endless source of trouble but are probably nevertheless worthwhile, given South Africa's fondness for most kinds of games. But the pressures to which the organizers of the Southampton congress have been subjected appear to derive from the belief that if South African scientists are denied the chance to play a part in international conferences, their government will similarly cave in. To say the least of it, that proposition is untested.

Whatever the chances, there seems no doubt that IUPPS and its British organizing committee should have resisted the press-

ures to which it was itself exposed during the summer. IUPPS is not, after all, the government of South Africa. Its constitution does include the stirring declaration that its proceedings are open to all. The British committee's two public statements of its reasons for disinviting South Africans, on 19 September and 22 October, refer to the decision as "hard" and as "taken under duress"; the second "keenly regrets the breach of the principle of free academic interchange". The first refers to the "pressure from several official and worthy organizations" in Britain "which maintain a policy of a total academic boycott of South Africa". The second more explicitly explains that if some of the proposed sponsors of next year's congress, the Southampton City Council in particular, were to withdraw support, the organizing committee might lose as much as £100,000, a quarter of the congress budget. Plainly one reason why the decision was so hard to make was that the committee members were forced to swallow their pride for lack of financial independence.

Nobody should take advantage of the committee's plight to throw brickbats at it. There is no reason to suppose that its members share the views of the pressure groups complaining that South Africans might attend the congress, and which have threatened trouble if they do. But it is fair to ask why the committee, conscious as it appears to have been of the principles of academic freedom, should have caved in so quickly and privately. At the least, it might have made a public issue of its dilemma, pleading the aid of other academic organizations or of academic opinion in general. The committee may have thought it had a duty, in the summer, to act quickly so as to make its conference a success, but by what right did it assume the responsibility of electing itself to be the first academic body to promulgate discriminatory regulations against fellow academics?

For the academic community as a whole, the objective now should be to forfend against future trouble of the kind that has afflicted the British offshoot of IUPPS. The Southampton City Council, the largest single sponsor of the planned conference, seem to have influentially twisted the organizers' arms; the lesson is that academics should not accept support if there are, or may be, strings attached. Student organizations seems to have been influential at Southampton in threatening to deny accommodation to visitors if South African scholars were among them, but it is far from clear how students to whom universities rent accommodation during term-time can decide what happens to it during the vacations, when they pay no rent. But particular responsibility for the IUPPS dilemma, and perhaps even for the collapse of a worthwhile conference, attaches to the Association of University Teachers, which has pursued a policy of "academic boycott" in relation to South Africa; is that what British academics wish their representative body to be saying?

To resist these pressures would of course be inconvenient. Congresses would be less grand if city councils were less generous, and would be less well attended if there were not cheapish student accommodation in which people could stay. There is also a danger that scientists from other countries would stay away if South Africans were free to attend, impeding the process of scientific communication. But scientific organizations are not powerless in the face of such difficulties. Plain speaking, and persuasion in the interests of tolerance, are freely at their disposal. They are tools too little used. □