

## Future of UK observatory

SIR—Your views on the future of the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO) (*Nature* 320, 384; 1986) cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

It is quite untrue that British astronomers are unperturbed by the announcement by the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) that RGO is to move; stunned would be a better word to describe our reaction to the extraordinary suggestion of a merger with the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh (ROE). But there is a growing ground swell of protest which will begin to surface as more people realize that they cannot this time leave action to somebody else.

I must also take issue with your use of the phrase "surplus observatory" in the heading. To put it at its lowest, if one observatory is surplus, why should it automatically be assumed that it is RGO? The telescopes at ROE are no more used for research than those at RGO. Moreover, I do not believe that either observatory is surplus to the needs of British astronomy. The two royal observatories are the major centres of research in optical astronomy in this country and it is healthy to have rivalry between them, just as it is good to have two major radio observatories and two major X-ray groups.

Each observatory runs large overseas facilities, which are complementary, and so no great benefit would accrue from administering them from the same site. A research council with vision would realize that developing the instruments for these facilities is only the first step in exploiting the overseas sites and that, far from their usefulness diminishing, both observatories can continue to play vital roles by collaborating with university astronomers to obtain the best results from the new instruments. It should not be assumed that the observatories' natural role is just to support university research; they will do that job far more effectively if they also collaborate actively in the research, as they do now.

RGO differs from ROE in not being actually on a university campus. (Actually, ROE is not quite on the campus either, but it is closer.) But that does not mean that it does not collaborate with university groups. Indeed, there has been very active collaboration with the University of Sussex for some twenty years, and we do not understand why the chairman of SERC feels that this connection is "not the kind of interaction we are looking for" (*Nature* 320, 297; 1986). There are many places where related institutions on the same campus have far less interaction. Propinquity is no guarantee of interaction nor does separation preclude it.

In addition to the connection with its nearest university, RGO also collaborates

with 12 British and European university groups on astronomical instrumentation and with more than 50 groups internationally on research projects. It is hard to see how a move to a particular university would increase this collaboration. As you say in your Opinion column, the benefits of an academic partnership are indeed huge, but they are already being realized. The danger of moving RGO from its present site is that the accompanying reduction of resources will be larger than the reductions already threatened at Herstmonceux and that universities as a whole will end up losing some of the valuable resources that they currently enjoy.

In short, the diffidence that you mention in deciding what to do about RGO arises simply from the fact that there is no obvious reason to do anything. RGO is doing a good job where it is and no serious scientific case has been made for moving it. The only conceivable reason for a move would be to save money, and there is no sign that that is possible without a massive reduction in resources which would defeat the claimed object of the move.

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## Sexist ads

SIR—In the issue of *Nature* for 3 April 1986, organic life forms were represented in your advertisements in the following proportions: four men, all wearing lab coats and engaged in "serious" scientific pursuits; one unisex doctor treating a female patient; one unisex mouse in a laboratory; one woman, dressed in tight-fitting jeans and denim jacket, exposing a portion of her lower back, smiling inanely and apparently advertising a product involved in DNA detection.

Unfortunately, the predilection of your advertisers to portray men (and in some cases animals) as serious-minded scientists, and women as dumb decorative objects, is not confined to this one issue. A notable feature of the back cover of past issues of *Nature* has been a dripping, apparently unclad blonde emerging from a lake and trying to sell air.

Please instruct your advertisers to take into account the fact that many of your readers are professional women, and are not responsive to the type of advertisement normally associated with the darker recesses of the tyre and car parts trades.

KATHLEEN WESTON, ALISON COZENS, HILLARY C.M. NELSON, LOUISE FAIRALL, LINDA AMOS, LAUREL MENGLE-GAW, FLEUR-ANGE LEFEBVRE, MELANIE J. CLARK, CYNTHIA KENYON, MARIANN BIENZ, LINDA BREEDEN,

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SIR—A recent series of advertisements in *Nature* shows us women in jeans or half-naked. Is it not a bit silly for a scientific journal to feature such silent propaganda for feminist and so-called liberal attitudes? Why not give women their dignity back by presenting them in skirts?

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## MRC unit closure

SIR—We are writing in response to the report (*Nature* 320, 478; 1986) on the proposed closure of the Medical Research Council (MRC)'s Mammalian Genome Unit in Edinburgh. We find it disturbing that the MRC secretary, Sir James Gowans, should be unable to explain the failure to find a "suitable" director for a molecular biology unit of international reputation.

The reduction in funding of MRC, imposed by the government, is no doubt the root cause of the closure. Financial uncertainty from year to year, together with the greater rewards to be attained elsewhere, produces a decline in morale that increases the rate at which scientists leave the country.

We would have expected that the closure of a molecular biology unit of high calibre would have merited rather more than a "small decision" by MRC. If it cannot find a director deemed "suitable" by its present criteria, we suggest that those criteria may need re-examining. The loss of the Mammalian Genome Unit will be yet another nail in the coffin of British science in a field which is receiving encouragement and increased financial support from more farsighted nations.

MEMBERS OF THE UNIT

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