

The boycott of South Africa

Nobody approves of apartheid in South Africa, but continuing efforts by the rest of the world to ostracize South African science create as many problems as they may yet solve.

Johannesburg

STATE President P. W. Botha's speech on Tuesday last week, 19 May, has disappointed the sprinkling of optimists but confirmed the greater throng of pessimists in their disappointment. With his National Party re-elected as the majority in the White chamber of the tricameral parliament (there are separate chambers for Indians and 'Coloureds') on the slogan "Reform, Yes! Surrender, No!", Botha might have said something about his vision of reform, might even have delivered the much advertised "Rubicon" speech he failed to make just over a year ago.

In the event, Botha chose to make what the newspapers here have called a "low-key" speech, a reiteration of the familiar message that law and order are prerequisites of reform, the National Party's name for the dismantling of apartheid in some still unspecified way. On the following day, Wednesday, the Johannesburg police arrested more than a score of people in the city, some students included, saying that they were suspected of terrorist crimes.

Acknowledgements

ARRANGEMENTS for the journey on which the accompanying material was collected were made by the offices of the South African Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in London and Pretoria at the insistence of the author. The identifiable direct costs of the journey to and within South Africa were met by *Nature*.

The writer (John Maddox, editor of *Nature*) is grateful to the presidency and staff of CSIR for many frank conversations, as many splendid meals and for transport in and around Pretoria. He also wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the vice-chancellors of the Universities of Cape Town, Pretoria and the Witwatersrand; members of administrative and academic staffs there and at the Universities of Stellenbosch and Western Cape and at the University of South Africa; the Royal Society of South Africa; the editor of the *South African Journal of Science*, Dr Graham Baker; the directors of the Human Sciences Research Council, the Medical Research Council and the National Accelerator Laboratory and their staffs; and the directors of Altech SA and of the Anglo-American Corporation. □

What follows is a report of impressions (and facts) gathered during a ten-day scamper between Pretoria, Johannesburg, Cape Town and some of their environs between. It is offered in the hope of informing the continuing debate in the scientific community outside South Africa about the extent to which, and the manner in which, South African science is to be ostracized on account of the generally detested policy of apartheid.

Although this journal takes the line that the exclusion of South African scientists from international meetings such as last year's archaeological congress at Southampton is a kind of scandal (see *Nature* 319, 85; 1986), those who do not share that opinion may also have a passing interest in an account of how members of the South African community have reacted to recent events, not least to the 6 May election for members of the white community alone. In any case, ghoulish though it may seem to people in South Africa, there can hardly be a more intricate and absorbing problem than that which now confronts them.

The issue of whether there should be a boycott of South African science, and if so how, is also a conundrum for those who live elsewhere. Several mechanisms have been proposed, some of which are patchily in operation (see p. 272). A recent innovation is the suggestion that the boycott of South African science should be "selective", applicable to some but not to others. So which authority decides whether so-and-so is acceptable? And could the scientific community survive the precedent of its agreement that the right to contribute to the process of discovery should be determined on other than scientific grounds?

The purpose of a boycott (used as a portmanteau term referring to restraints in general) also needs closer definition outside South Africa. Several purposes are logically admissible. They range from making members of the South African community think more deeply about the social and political problems that confront them (and be more energetic in their resolution) to the effecting of political change in South Africa. But sheer distaste cannot qualify as a logical justification of boycott; if it did, prejudice would be licensed for the rest of time.

The simple safeguard is that boycotters should be clear in their own minds, and in advance, of the conditions in which they would relent. They also owe it not merely

to those affected but to their own objectives to declare what they are hoping to accomplish: abolition of the Group Areas Act, the abolition of the Population Classification Act, the attainment of an average non-white income exceeding that of whites, one person-one vote or something else? Not to specify the circumstances in which redemption would be possible must surely be tantamount to an unnatural punishment, in the language of the US Constitution.

The matter is important, and not merely for those who live in southern Africa. The scientific community there is an important part of the international endeavour; most of even those who would ostracize it now would probably regard its return to the fold as an unmitigated benefit. But failure in that regard would be synonymous with failure of the reform process (now apparently in stagnation) and much more serious trouble for all of us.

To the extent that the objective of boycott is to effect political change, it is inevitable that any account of its effectiveness must also seem political, perhaps tendentially so. But what follows differs most from most contributions to this journal in being an attempt to reflect what people (mostly South Africans) think and to suggest what they (and the rest of us) might do (see p. 259).

There is a precedent. Seventeen years ago, accompanying a report of the condition of science in South Africa at the time, *Nature* likened excellent South African science to a Trojan Horse (*Nature* 228, 301; 1970). Surely rationality would triumph over obscurantism? And surely the growth of gross national product, bred of the application of science in technology, would undermine the integrity of apartheid? That hope has been mostly but not entirely disappointed; the science is even better, but the issue of apartheid is still there.

Much of the trouble is that the South African intellectual community, while more solidly and explicitly opposed to apartheid than previously, has not yet found a way of following the earlier prescription that it should seek a way "to argue the particular as well as the general case against the present arrangements" so as to "change the present climate". But if, 17 years ago, it seemed as if the greatest danger was that "time is running out", how can one by now be sure that it is not already too late? □