

## COMMENTARY

## SILENT SCIENCE

by Bernard Dixon

Injured pride, even in small quantities, is a dubious starting point for a rational discussion of anything. So I have waited several months before telling the story of the *scientific meeting I was not permitted to attend*—months in which, though the pique has dispersed, my perplexity has grown even stronger. The reason for recounting the affair at all is that it does, I believe, point up a topical lesson for the biotechnology community.

The location was West Berlin, where I was attending one of that city's superb and quite unique Dahlem conferences. During a coffee break away from the matter in hand (the structure and activities of biofilms), someone commented that another enticing event was about to open barely two kilometres away. Entitled "The European Biosafety Workshop on the Contained Use of Modified Organisms in the Environment," it had been organised by the Commission of the European Communities and by West Germany's Federal Ministry for Research and Technology, under the auspices of the new Academy of Science and Technology in Berlin. And very timely, too, in view of the Commission's moves towards community-wide regulations in this field—and in view of West Germany's domestic problems in dealing with public apprehensions over bio-industry.

Through a friend living in West Berlin, I acquired a copy of the programme. It showed that the workshop covered microorganisms, plants, and animals, and that the agenda moved from areas of current uncertainty in the environmental release of engineered organisms (day one) to recommendations for future research and development (day three). Although essentially a scientific conference, the meeting was to be attended by members of the European Parliament and by officials from the World Health Organization and the Office of Economic Cooperation and Development. Clearly, biofilms would have to go on the side burner for a few hours while I hiked down the Budapestrasse to the Grand Hotel Esplanade and sat in on this other event.

"I'll be surprised if they let you in," said my friend, a science correspondent working for West German newspapers, magazines, and radio. He then told me that he had already been refused entry to the meeting, but had been invited to a press conference at the end. There was a total ban on media involvement, although I might be able to sneak in if I knew some of the key participants (I did). So I rang the conference organisers. Could I attend as a visiting journalist from England? No. Could they approach one of the chairmen on my behalf? No. The meeting was totally closed to the media. "This is a *scientific meeting*," the voice on the telephone emphasised. "You can come to the press conference if you like."

So I returned to biofilms, just a little miffed, and went along three days later instead. In striking contrast to the voice on the telephone, the welcome to the press conference was warm, even fulsome. And the event itself was one of the grandest I have ever attended. Amid the plush opulence of the Hotel Esplanade, we were shepherded around tables heaving with gastronomic delicacies and

graced by four different varieties of drink. The platform party then arrived—as many as eight speakers, representing the organising bodies and reflecting the various sectors of the subject.

What followed, however, was banal in the extreme. The set speeches were limited to generalities and to elementary background information with which the science journalists present were already fully familiar. The questions which followed the speeches were answered with similar imprecision. In short, the organisers had called up the notebooks and recorders but had overlooked the elementary principle, long familiar to commercial companies, of working out beforehand exactly what they wanted to say. The speakers, in other words, were tight-lipped after three days of deliberations *in camera* over one of the most socially contentious sectors of present-day science and technology.

The outcome was miserable. The media contingent (impressive in both quantitative and qualitative terms) grumbled about being summoned to a non-event. The platform party looked surprised and disappointed. There were a few sharp exchanges. Then conversation wilted, they departed, and we were left alone to eat, drink, and go on our way.

A few readers may find little to criticise in the way these events were organised. In a free society, after all, who is to argue that scientists—or butchers, teachers, or accountants—must not hold meetings from which outsiders are barred? Why on Earth do journalists expect to walk in, uninvited, to gatherings of this sort?

Such questions have weight. But consider the context. This event took place in West Germany, where public and political disquiet about biotechnology was (and is) stronger than anywhere else in the world; where Hoechst had recently won only qualified victory after a furious three-year battle with environmentalists over its plans to operate a recombinant DNA insulin plant in Frankfurt; where Invitron was facing a similar campaign against a new plant in Hannover; where a Parliamentary Commission had recommended a five-year moratorium on the environmental release of genetically engineered organisms; and where such happenings had persuaded Bayer and BASF to locate new big facilities in the U.S. rather than in their own country. This, too, was the city in which the International Gen-Ethic Network was and is headquartered, and from where it seeks to extend its influence throughout Europe.

In those circumstances, the most bizarre way for the scientific community to deal with public concern, both sensible and silly, was for researchers to meet in private over three days and then to hold a lavish media briefing at which they had nothing in particular to say. Given that the world's press was admitted even to the great gathering at the Asilomar Conference Center in February 1975, when worldwide alarm over recombinant DNA hit its early height, the Berlin cabal was literally unbelievable. This was a textbook example of how not to win friends and influence people.