



FILE  
de

10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

DR. NICHOLSON  
CABINET OFFICE

Life Sciences Conference

The Prime Minister was grateful for your minute of 18 April reporting on the life sciences conference which was held in Tokyo in March.

The Prime Minister has noted the contents of your minute. She agrees that it would be wrong to send a telegram to Mr. Nakasone at this stage.

I am sending a copy of this minute to Richard Hatfield.

David Barclay

25 April 1984

MR





Prime Minister<sup>(2)</sup>

For information.

W.0320

18 April 1984

JMB  
24/4

PRIME MINISTER

LIFE SCIENCES CONFERENCE, 19-21 MARCH, TOKYO

Mr Nakasone consulted you at the turn of the year about the nomination of three UK experts to attend a conference on the life sciences to be convened in Tokyo, on Mr Nakasone's initiative, by the Japan Foundation. The conference has now taken place, and the key UK delegate, Dr Sydney Brenner, has offered some insights into the motivation of Mr Nakasone, as well as on the conference and its follow-up, of which you should be aware.

Background to Japanese Initiative

2. Dr Brenner confirmed that the Japanese have identified biotechnology as a key technology for the future, and that they are intent on developing their biotechnology (especially pharmaceutical) industry as a major exporter. There are two obstacles to this plan:

a. Japan is behind the United States and Europe in molecular biology because of structural defects in their university system. To compensate, they have been assimilating the technology developed particularly in the United States, by sending students to advanced academic institutions;

b. There are active and effective Japanese environment/political groups opposed to the development of technologies associated with genetic engineering and this factor, coupled with the tight controls in Japan on working with radioactive substances, has inhibited scientific work.



3. The holding of the conference was an important means of overcoming these obstacles, since it held out the prospect of:

- a. obtaining international approval and confirmation of reducing controls over genetic engineering research;
- b. confirming the importance of biotechnology as an area of research in which Japan must be competitive;
- c. registering, at an international level, the human side of Japanese endeavours in science and technology;
- d. building up Japanese international contacts and collaboration in this area.

#### The Conference

4. Dr Brenner reports that the breadth of the subject, and the varied backgrounds of delegates, did not make for highly constructive discussions in the sessions. The two main conclusions were:

- a. that there should be less worry about the creation of micro-organisms harmful to human beings, since they were likely to be rare and fragile, and
- b. that diversity of opinion on the ethics of life sciences should be expected to continue and that it would not be appropriate at the present stage to press for agreement on the necessity for normative rules. A fairly bland communiqué was issued.

5. Nonetheless, this fairly meagre result has probably achieved Mr Nakasone's objectives. His initiative was given a further boost by the announcement at the start of the conference that France has undertaken to hold a follow-up conference next year. Mr Nakasone will wish to report on the



conference and the follow-up at the London Economic Summit.

Further Action

6. Our Tokyo Embassy has suggested that a congratulatory telegram from you to Mr Nakasone might be appropriate.

✓ After consultation with the FCO, I do not recommend such a telegram at this stage. The UK obtained considerable credit from the calibre and contribution of the delegates you nominated; the outcome was not, from the UK point of view, especially remarkable, and strongly endorsing the conference now may give a false impression of welcoming the prospect of a follow-up conference.

7. However, I think we shall have to accept the further conference with good grace, and do our best to ensure that it is a useful event, even though the motivation of the French in hosting the conference seems to be essentially political. Some of the issues raised in the Japanese conference touch on important public policy matters affecting guidelines for medical and biological research. If the French conference could be given a more specific theme and involve those connected with the policy debate, there might be a valuable exchange of views. I propose to approach the French convenor of the conference, whom I know well, with a view to attempting to influence the planning of the next conference along these lines.

8. I am sending a copy of this minute to Sir Robert Armstrong.

RBN

ROBIN B NICHOLSON  
Chief Scientific Adviser

Cabinet Office  
18 April 1984