

PRIME MINISTER

MEETING WITH SIR GEORGE PORTER: 1815, THURSDAY 29 MAY

Lord Rothschild suggested that you might find it interesting and worthwhile to have a word with Sir George Porter about an idea of his. You agreed. You will need to leave No. 10 at 1900 hours for drinks with the de Rothschilds. So you have something like three-quarters of an hour for the meeting.

I have had a word with Sir George. He would like to talk generally about how the Royal Society might be able to play a larger part in Government discussions on science, and about how the Society might help improve general understanding of scientific research and education. Sir George also has two specific ideas he would like to put to you as well (which I think must be what Lord Rothschild had in mind when he wrote):

Proposal for a national advisory council for science

Sir George believes there is a fairly general feeling amongst scientists that their representation at senior levels in Government is inadequate. The Royal Society do not however go along with the Labour proposal for a Minister for Science. They believe departmental responsibilities should be left alone but that there is a need for a new committee of 10 scientists or so (not drawn from the chairmen of research councils and so on but to sit as independents). The council should preferably be chaired by you. The Chief Scientific Adviser and his office would provide the secretariat. The Royal Society would be willing to help in any way it could. The idea would be that the committee would act as an independent source of scientific advice but that it would also be able to field criticism from, e.g., the Save British Science movement. Sir George had in mind setting it up for an experimental period of three or four years.

You will not wish to be much drawn on this idea without looking at a detailed suggestion much more closely. But, quite apart from the difficulties of adding to the burden on your own time (if you were to chair it), adding yet another committee to the cluster of research councils, the Advisory Board, ACARD, and the committee of chief scientists, there also seems to be some question about whether the idea for this group to be primarily an arm of Government (to be used in some way to promote and defend Government policy on science and to get it over better) or to lobby Government - in all probability for more resources. Sir George might be asked to consider that point in particular.

Proposal to tackle the brain drain

The Royal Society will shortly be producing a report on the brain drain. This will establish that there is a serious leaking away of scientific talent from the UK. The problem is not so much numbers as that it is the top quality scientists who are going. The difficulty is money. The top Chair at Oxford pays £24,000 a year. Comparisons with City and Civil Service salaries cause resentment, and the much higher incomes being earned by scientists in the United States provides the magnet to pull scientists away.

Sir George does not, however, wish to ask for more money. But he believes there is a need for very large merit awards to be available to keep the best talent here. He suggests that Royal Society Professorships, where the incumbents are currently paid the same as other professors, might be halved in number, but pay double the salary. This would still not match US incomes, but it should provide the right kind of incentive for scientists and reduce the relative attractiveness of the other side of the Atlantic.

This proposal looks an interesting one, but seems to be very much a matter for Sir George and the Royal Society. He might find it worthwhile, however, to speak both to John Fairclough

and to Mr. Baker before taking any final decision. You will also wish to urge Sir George to keep DES and John Fairclough informed about the forthcoming Royal Society report on the brain drain.

More generally, you will wish to support the idea of closer co-operation between the Royal Society and Government (the Reception at No.10 was a great success). As a Fellow yourself, you would welcome that. It might be worth Sir George and John Fairclough working out one or two more specific proposals.

MEA

(MARK ADDISON)

28 May 1986

SRWAEC