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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

30 May 1986

Dear Rob

The Prime Minister yesterday met Sir George Porter, President of the Royal Society. He had two main points he wished to put to the Prime Minister.

The first related to the representation of scientists at a senior level in Government. The Royal Society, in its evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee, had concluded that there was little to be gained by changing the existing structure of committees, including the Research Councils, the Advisory Board for Research Councils, ACARD, and the Chief Scientific Adviser's Committee of Chief Scientists. In particular, the Society did not support the idea of a Minister for Science. Nonetheless, they were clear that there was a need for the scientists' voice to be heard more effectively. They accordingly proposed a new National Science Advisory Council. This would be composed entirely of practising scientists, educationalists or industrialists. It should be chaired preferably by the Prime Minister or by a non-Departmental Minister. It would be able to look in particular at the scientific issues which crossed Departmental boundaries. The Committee would be advisory only and would be kept small, about 12 members. The secretariat would be provided by the Chief Scientist's office.

Sir George saw the new committee acting as a fresh channel for scientists to make an input to Government policy making at a high level. Such a committee would also do a good deal to improve morale generally in the scientific community, and take off some of the pressure generated by such movements as "Save British Science".

The Prime Minister asked Sir George to set out a more detailed proposal on paper which she would then give careful consideration to. She noted, however, that there would need to be strong reasons for adding to the current committee structure; that scientists were already finding it difficult to devote enough time to working on the existing committees; that it would be important not to cut across the good work being done by Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer on the UGC and by Sir David Phillips on the ABRC; that it was not clear who would draw up the agendas and provide the necessary support (this would be a major extra burden for the Chief

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Scientific Adviser and his office); and that careful consideration would need to be given to the composition of the committee. Sir George noted the Prime Minister's concerns and agreed to put forward a paper setting out the Royal Society's ideas more fully.

Sir George's second main area of concern was the brain drain. Many of our best scientists were now working abroad, particularly in the United States. At Oxford university every professor's basic salary was £24,000, even though their market values and responsibilities varied widely. Such salaries did not offer an incentive to the country's top young scientists, who might be appointed to Chairs at 30 yet had no further salary increases to look forward to. By comparison with the Civil Service, City and industry salaries and pensions for scientists were inadequate. Sir George was not, however, asking for more money. The Royal Society supported 24 professors, on salaries which reflected the UK going rate. Sir George suggested that the Royal Society might halve the number of these professorships and double the salary. He wanted to know whether an initiative of that kind would have the Government's support.

The Prime Minister said that it would be difficult to match the level of American rewards until the enterprise culture had taken root properly in the UK, and the country could afford to pay its top scientists what they deserved. She agreed that the right kind of incentives were needed to develop the quality of British research, and to retain our best scientists here. She was sympathetic to Sir George's proposal but it could realistically only have a marginal effect. There would be difficulties too in paying the higher salaries for a fixed period of, say, 5 years, if the scientist thought that he might lose the extra payment after that. Sir George would include a note on this proposal in the paper he provides the Prime Minister on his proposals for a new Scientific Advisory Committee.

I am copying this letter to John Fairclough, the Chief Scientific Adviser, and to Michael Stark in Sir Robert Armstrong's office.

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Mark Addison

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