

## Visas for scientific congresses

SIR—In the summer of 1986, the secretary general of the European Congress of Pathology, Dr J. Stejskal, invited me to take part in the congress, to be held in Prague in September 1987. He assured me that my being an Israeli would pose no problems in obtaining a Czechoslovak visa. I therefore registered and was told by the congress secretariat that I should obtain a visa in Vienna.

Having arrived in Vienna a week before the congress, I went several times to the Czechoslovak consulate and travel agency and telephoned Prague, but I was unable to obtain a visa and so could not participate in the congress.

This occurrence might be regarded as unimportant. After all, international congresses can be successful even if a number of scientists are excluded. No great harm was done, fruitful scientific exchange could still be accomplished and the progress of science was not appreciably disturbed.

In some respects the same reasoning could be applied to the burning of books and banning of unorthodox art and opinions. Books can be reprinted and banned art can find alternative outlets. Honest scientists and others who care for humanitarian ideals abhor such practices and resist becoming passive partners in discrimination of scientists because of nationality, race or creed.

I propose that all scientists who organize international congresses and meetings should make it a rule not to hold meetings in countries that practise discrimination. Definite promises from the governments concerned should be a condition for accepting invitations from such countries, and broken promises should be publicized in scientific journals in order to avoid further infringements of the rules.

MOSHE WOLMAN

Tel Aviv University,  
Sackler Faculty of Medicine,  
Tel Aviv, Israel

J. STEJSKAL REPLIES—I have read Professor Wolman's letter with regret and I understand his bitterness. We included him among the invited speakers for our congress because of his international reputation and his good relationship with Czechoslovak scientists and we did our best to enable him to come.

There are no diplomatic relations at present between Israel and Czechoslovakia, so that visas are dealt with by embassies in a third country, which complicates matters. For this reason, our secretariat added to the registration documents a note recommending that Israeli citizens should make the necessary application to the Czechoslovak Embassy

in Vienna as soon as possible. This recommendation was followed by other Israeli participants, who arrived in Prague without difficulty.

Unfortunately, however, Professor Wolman took his documents to the Czechoslovak consulate only a few days before the congress, which was deemed too late by the consular official concerned. Intervention by my secretariat was ineffectual, even though our invitation to Professor Wolman had been approved several months previously by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Although it is hard to understand why the simple act of stamping a passport should take longer than a few minutes, long intervals seem nowadays to be needed for international administration in spite of computers and other sophisticated devices. The British consulate in Prague takes two weeks to grant a visa to Czechoslovak scientists wishing to attend a congress in the United Kingdom, and the US and French consulates take three and four weeks respectively.

J. STEJSKAL  
(Secretary General)

XIth European Congress of  
Pathology,  
Vítězného února 31,  
120 26 Praha 2, Czechoslovakia

## Touch of blackmail?

SIR—Serious discussion of the epistemological basis of scientific research is welcome. But to be useful it must be tolerably competent, and the recent article by Theocharis and Psimopoulos (*Nature* 329, 595; 1987) is not.

The most serious flaw is the consistent perception of any sceptical or constructivist deviation from absolute inductivism as "epistemological anarchism". This is absolutism with a vengeance. One unfair remark in this vein is the assertion that "endorsement of the antitheses [to the orthodox realist thesis] saves one from the painstaking effort of discovering new truths", implying that epistemological sceptics do not or cannot undertake serious research leading to reliable knowledge. But what of John Ziman's (I should have thought respectable) view that the products of scientific enquiry, while as reliable (= true?) as we can possibly make them, must always remain open to revision?

The logical development of the whole article rests on the authors' assumption that whatever is not absolutely (timelessly, objectively) true must be untrue; that, however, is not supported by current philosophy, and is contrary to the assumptions underlying open scientific enquiry. This mistake invalidates the conclusions of the article, including the proposed

remedy for the under-funding of science, namely that scientists should "explain adequately how they propose to make new and fruitful discoveries".

Even the potentially interesting question of the psychological effect of the antithesis is treated shabbily: "If one believes that there exists no objective truth . . . it is highly unlikely that such a person would make any new discoveries (funding agencies take note)."

The touch of blackmail here sums it up: no treatment is too harsh for heretics.

NICHOLAS J. SELLEY

Faculty of Education,  
Kingston Polytechnic,  
Kingston Hill, Kingston upon Thames,  
Surrey KT2 7LB, UK

## Light ring grounded

SIR — John D.G. Rather's dismissal (*Nature* 329, 480; 1987) of astronomers' protests (*Nature* 326, 125; 1987) about the launching of the Eiffel Tower's light ring amply illustrates the cavalier barbarism of its proponents in relation to astronomy, in marked contrast to the sensitive expression of their idealism for their own science.

Unlike Venus and the Moon, the light ring would move rapidly relative to the stars. Thus astronomers could not point telescopes away from it without the risk that it would later interfere. It would have a low ratio of mass/cross-section and would be asymmetric, so, because of solar light and wind pressure and the variable effects of atmospheric drag, its orbit could not be reliably calculated much in advance. It would not be 'easy' to avoid. Because it would be visible as an extended object, the solid angle of space which it would sweep out makes the probability that it would have serious effects very significant during, say, a year's passes above the horizon, and these effects would not be 'improbable'.

A point which I have not seen addressed by its advocates is how the 'rubber' structure (or others like it) will look if, on launch, part of it fails to inflate, or if it deflates during orbit — perhaps it will look like a component in the widely broadcast advertising campaign which you advocate in your editorial (*Nature* 329, 471; 1987).

Astronomers have demonstrated their commitment to the exploitation of space by participating in numerous space programmes. What celebrates the promise of space more — to launch a 'symbol of idealism and inspiration' which at the same time reduces our opportunity to understand our Universe or carefully and responsibly to use the near-space environment for the benefit of mankind?

PAUL MURDIN

Royal Greenwich Observatory,  
Herstmonceux Castle, Hailsham,  
East Sussex BN27 1RP, UK