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THE PORTON-DOWN AFFAIR

Tuesday's demonstration against Dr Inch from Porton Down, the biological and chemical warfare department, has created an uproar. It was meant to !

Research into chemical and biological warfare in this country is one of the most closely guarded secrets of the Government. No matter which party is in power, question about the nature and purpose of institutions like Porton Down can never be discussed. They remain in secrecy behind the barbed wire fences.

The demonstration was an attempt to make this pernicious type of research as widely known as possible.

It was not organised as an orderly line of people with placards standing outside the meeting. It was a deliberate attempt to change the nature of the meeting. The idea of allowing biological and chemical warfare to be masked as an academic subject was directly challenged. The intention was to deliver an indictment of such warfare, and request Dr Inch to justify his participation in the activities of Porton Down.

Why did the protest take this form? Because it was considered that no conventional form of demonstration would achieve any publicity.

A placard demonstration would have achieved practically nothing. The maximum might have been a paragraph on an obscure page of the Guardian and another three in the Essex County Standard. The problem of Porton Down would not have impinged onto the consensus; and everybody would have gone back to sleep.

By acting unexpectedly, the views of the demonstrators have reached a wider audience. We have no reason to be very optimistic, but maybe some people at least will try to find out more about Porton Down and similar institutions. To create the means whereby such places can be closed down is not easy. But people being aware of their existence is the first step.

Some people have suggested that the demonstration was a denial of free speech. But was it?

It was an attempt to force Dr Inch not to compartmentalise his work, but to discuss it in its social context. It was an attempt to bring into the open topics on which no meaningful free speech is possible, because we are not told what is going on, (under the shadow of the Official Secrets Act).

Where there is no opportunity for free discussion, how can it be maintained that free speech exists?

Unless people are prepared to challenge men like Dr Inch on the rare occasions when they are able to, we may never know what is produced at Porton Down until it is actually used, and maybe used in the name of the British People.

It is interesting here to examine the attitude towards free speech of the organisers of the meeting. That was interrupted, who subsequently vehemently denounced what had happened. Not only did they change the venue of the meeting at the last minute to prevent non-chemists from attending. They showed considerable hostility when those who they had attempted to exclude finally found the meeting. They even went so far as to attempt to prevent people from entering the meeting. Was this an attempt to encourage the free exchange of ideas?

From the evidence, it seems that some members of the Chemistry Department are treating the demonstration as directed at the department rather than against chemical warfare.

In a sense they might be right, but only if they create an impression of wanting to divorce the moral implications of working at Porton Down from academic investigations. Most scientists would of course say that they have a responsible attitude to their work. Yet, as in nearly all other fields of study, much of the work they do is used for ends which they would feel to be morally unacceptable.

What, in this situation, do scientists in our society tend to do? A few actively voice their dissent with the misuse of science. The majority unfortunately either continue their work and keep their morality to themselves, or, worst of all, divorce morality from science entirely and pretend that they are doing "pure research".

This at a time when science is of the utmost importance to the future of mankind when the possibilities it holds for the transformation of human life are enormous. BUT at the same time, this tremendous transforming power can be grossly misused. That it is misused is not difficult to prove- at the present time we have the spectacle of thousands of scientists in the West as well as in the so-called Socialist countries working either directly or indirectly on projects whose purpose is the creation of means of mass destruction. This is at a time when the world is faced both with the problem of widespread famine and with the means of solving it, if only science could be used in the right way.

The importance and power of science today is such that scientists can no longer stand back and passively accept the implications of what they do. There have been times in the past when scientists have actively debated the consequences of their work. It is time scientists came down from their mythical ivory towers, realised what their work can lead to, and publicly voiced their dissent with the misuse of science.

They must realise the difficulties they face in obtaining changes in Government policy towards such misuse, and even in initiating meaningful public debate. But this is a problem faced by scientists and non-scientists alike. Together we must find ways of changing the situation.

We hope that the Tuesday demonstration was a step towards making people at least aware of the problems we face.