

INCIDENTS AT WIVENHOE HOUSE, 7th May, 1968.

About a year ago the University Chemical Society invited Dr. T. D. Inch of the Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment at Porton Down to speak at the University, and a lecture was advertised on 'Chemical and Biological Properties of Toxic Chemicals'. The meeting took place at 4.30 on Tuesday, 7th May, in the Committee Room in Wivenhoe House. It was open to visitors, some of whom came from a distance.

As soon as Dr. Inch opened his lecture a student stood up and prevented him being heard by loudly announcing the intention of a group of students present to stop the lecture and to conduct a 'war crimes tribunal'; he then went on to read an 'indictment' consisting of a list of 'charges'. A great deal of shouting ensued, and the Chairman (Dr. Tillett) decided after about five minutes to abandon the meeting. At about this point a student came to the front of the room and, shouting something about mustard gas, threw a yellow powder at Dr. Inch, which covered him and people nearby. Amid much pushing and jostling, the Head Porter made his way to Dr. Inch; a student aimed a blow at the Head Porter but was prevented from striking him by a member of the Maintenance Staff (Mr. Wyatt). Members of staff of the Chemistry Department and the Head Porter got Dr. Inch as far as the door of the room. Students sat down to block the exit and the Head Porter was dragged away from Dr. Inch by a student.

Scuffling broke out, during which a screen was knocked over and a student was seen to be pushed and kicked. The students then separated Dr. Inch from the Chemistry Department staff, and by linking arms penned him in a corner in the lobby by the garden door to Wivenhoe House. They then read to him loudly paragraphs of their indictment, and asked him to reply. This he did, but various parts of his reply were shouted down and met by jeers and heckling. Members of the Chemistry Department staff were prevented by jostling students from reaching Dr. Inch. At this point (about 4.45) Dr. Tillett asked for the police to be called, and Mr. Wyatt phoned.

The situation continued as above until police arrived. Having waited for reinforcements, the police climbed over students sitting in the East Wing corridor, and attempted to extricate Dr. Inch. This they eventually did amid a great deal of pushing, and more yellow powder was thrown. Dr. Inch was hustled through the basement of Wivenhoe House to a police car. When they realised that Dr. Inch had escaped, groups of students ran to the front of Wivenhoe House and chased after the car. There was then a considerable amount of argument and jostling with the remaining police outside Wivenhoe House during which a policeman was knocked to the ground and others had their caps knocked off.

The University's regulations do not legislate against the disruption of an academic lecture arranged by a University Society, nor against abusive behaviour towards an invited speaker, as they were drafted without anticipating the need for such provision. In the absence of an agreed disciplinary procedure to deal with conduct of this kind, the Vice-Chancellor, as the person responsible for maintaining good order in the University, has acted under his powers set out in Section V paragraph 7 of the Statutes (against which there is no appeal) in excluding from all parts of the University and its precincts from today until 19th June, 1968, three students whose participation in these events seemed to him most culpable. The end of the period of exclusion is the date of the second ordinary meeting of the Senate this term. The Senate will decide what further disciplinary action, if any, to take.

It may be noted that on 4th March, 1968, the Dean of Students issued a statement warning students of the extreme seriousness with which any actions would be treated which could be construed as attempts to limit freedom of expression within the University either for members of the University or for speakers invited by University Societies.

We are disturbed by the tone of the Registrar's account of the events of May 7 at Wivenhoe House; and in particular by two underlying assumptions - one concerned with an issue of fact, the other with an issue of principle.

On the first of these we are uneasy at the claim, implied in the document, to being a judiciously established and unequivocal account of what must necessarily have been a confused incident. The necessity (both legalistic and humane) of acknowledging this difficulty may be sufficiently indicated by comparing the Registrar's version with another eye-witness account given below; but even without this, there is a palpable discrepancy, in the official report, between the obliqueness of the account and the specificity of the condemnation.

More serious (because more likely to lead to irretrievable hardening of attitudes) is the oversimplification of the issue of principle; and here it is necessary to say that "freedom of speech" is unfortunately not a matter whose interpretation in this case is self-evident; and that it is possible to hold serious views which do not share the premisses on which the official case seems to rest. We regret, for example, the innuendo that it is self-evidently barbarous, in 1968, to turn an academic lecture on toxic chemicals into a confrontation on the ethics of chemical and bacteriological warfare.

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A lecture on "Chemical and Biological Properties of Toxic Chemicals" by a Dr. T.D. Inch of C.D.E.E., Porton Down was announced in the University Newsletter (3rd May) to take place on 7th May 1968 under the auspices of the Chemical Society in L.T.B.2.

A quarter of an hour before the meeting was due to start, members of the Chemistry Department were informed by the organisers that the place of meeting was changed to a smaller room in Wivenhoe House. Nevertheless, a large number of people (staff and students), who were not members of the Chemistry Department, turned up at the new meeting place. At the sight of these numbers the organisers first announced that the meeting was exclusive to the Chemistry Department; then, yielding to protest, they allowed fifty people in, after which they claimed that the meeting was full; which was manifestly not true. Eventually, however, most people gained access, though some had to wait until after the lecture was due to begin.

But Dr. Inch did not begin. Instead, a group of students rose by succession to read out a document describing the effects of C.B.W. agents and British complicity in the American use of such chemicals in Vietnam. At this point the atmosphere, apart from some innocuous barracking and counter-barracking, was orderly enough. After ten minutes, while the reading still continued, the Chairman announced that Dr. Inch was leaving. His path was crowded by latecomers trying to listen to the indictment. Through these, members of the Chemistry Department sought to push a way; and it was at this point, in an atmosphere now of confusion and jostling, that a student, standing nearby, scattered mustard powder over Dr. Inch's jacket. Chemistry Department members turned angrily upon those students (the majority) who wanted Dr. Inch to remain and answer questions.

Dr. Inch got out - to cries of "Close Porton down!", "Keep science clean!", but was soon surrounded by pursuing students in a corner of the lobby by the garden door to Wivenhoe House, where the reading of the indictment was completed and questions put to Dr. Inch. Hecklers were quelled with shouts of "let him speak!". A dialogue ensued for about ten minutes in an orderly fashion, after which Professor Gordon suggested that the meeting might move back to the meeting room.

By this time, however, at least half-a-dozen police cars had arrived and their occupants were now gathering in the adjacent corridor. It was clear to the students that, if the meeting was now transferred, Dr. Inch would be immediately "rescued" and removed. After about five minutes the police stirred, trampling over sitting students in order to reach Dr. Inch. Students, linking arms to prevent them leaving, were pushed back by the police and roughly wrenched away by a senior member of the Chemistry Department. Dr. Inch was then taken through a side door and driven away in a police car.

A crowd of students collected round the remaining cars, arguing with the police. Finally, the cars drove off and the students dispersed.

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