

Letter to the Editor

Sir,

The European Physical Society — Breadth of Purpose

In the November (1969) issue of *Europhysics News*, the President of the European Physical Society wrote: "The European Physical Society came into existence because the first initiative rapidly gained the support of a large number of physicists. Also most of the existing national societies and academies, in spite of a great variety of aims and structures, supported the movement from the beginning". In recognizing the limitations of the EPS, in its early years, the President recognized that "survival depends on the continuation of the atmosphere that promoted its (EPS) foundation and has sustained it until now" — an atmosphere due to the personal convictions and support of the members of the Society who "more than anyone else, are aware that Science today means more and more to the future of human society". These facts apply in any context covering activities of the Society. In this letter I wish to underline the second statement because, without lively action in that respect, the EPS might fail to hold the essential support of professional bodies and thereby fail to survive as the effective body which we hope to develop.

Article 2 (1) of the Constitution states "The purpose of the Society is and shall be to contribute to and promote the advancement of physics, in Europe and in neighbouring countries, by all suitable means..." The words "advancement of physics" were used by the authors of this Article in the widest possible sense. They were agreed upon as including "advancement of scientific research in the field of physics", "advancement of physics education at all levels" and the "exploitation of new knowledge in technological advancement". This triple implication was fully recognized in the programme of special lectures arranged for the inaugural scientific meeting of the Society in Florence in April 1969, when the technological as

distinct from purely scientific interests were provided for in an excellent talk given by Dr. H.B.G. Casimir (Eindhoven). He discussed the interaction of physics and industry, and saw basic science and technology developing as two parallel streams. He demonstrated, most impressively, how industrial research draws on both the old and the new results of basic research, throws up new problems and new aids for further basic research, thus emphasizing the importance of fostering the unity of physics and its interaction with physics technology.

Not only must the interaction of physics technology be increasingly fostered but the interaction of science and technology with social problems must also be increasingly recognized. There is a growing feeling that many social problems are associated with the expanding role of science and technology, which, in turn, have become symbols of the status of a society's strength and prestige. With goals in the social world moving more rapidly than the ability of science and technology to keep abreast of them, it is important that scientists should take a lead in educating society in the relevance of science to society, the importance of basic research, the need for its continued growth, the relative importance of various fields of science and the relative merits of basic and applied science. In all this, physicists should have a major interest and contribution to offer. Some of their work has been seen to have a tremendous impact on the nature and rate of change for society in a technological world; their researches in "big science" call for major financial support from public resources. For this reason alone, it can be no longer comfortable for any such scientists to claim that their only concern should be the search for knowledge without regard to how such knowledge may be applied. Such an attitude could no longer hope to attract essential financial support and it might well diminish the attraction of more able students to scientific and technical studies.

Science Research Councils are now showing a consciousness of the need to avoid a withdrawal to a world of abstractions and a failure to recognize the needs of society at large. They are taking action to support research, pure or applied, likely to lead to the discovery of new knowledge and techniques of significant scientific, economic or social benefit. Professional institutions must identify themselves more fully with economic and sociological problems having a high scientific, technological and engineering content. The EPS must strive to ensure that, having been born into a highly technological world, it seeks every opportunity to contribute to the advancement of physics, and the goals of society, through the exploitation of new knowledge in physics, no less than the discovery and dissemination of such new knowledge. It must strive to integrate the interests of every section of its membership, academic and professional, and be seen to be effectively concerned with the interests of society at large, in so far as those may be determined by the advancement of physics.

In this connexion one recalls the proposal at the last EPS Council meeting to create an Advisory Committee on Physics and Industry (*Europhysics News* September 1969). It was suggested that such a Committee would stimulate the organization of physics conferences with emphasis on industrial applications. Such a Committee should co-operate with the Divisional Committees in sponsoring at least an annual meeting concerned with physics in industry, and it must obviously collaborate with the Advisory Committee on Physics and Society. The Council of the EPS should give most careful attention, and preferably early evidence of action to attract industrial physicists to its membership, and demonstrate the overall interest of the EPS in the application of physics.

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