

## Letter to the Editor

# ISHC International Advisory Board – A relic of the past, or body with a future?

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The 10<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Homogeneous Catalysis was held in Princeton, New Jersey on August 11–16. Some 350 scientists attended. According to the International Advisory Board on Homogeneous Catalysis, much of the symposium's success in portraying the current status of homogeneous catalysis was probably due to the Board's own activities.

It might be possible to share the Board's admiration for its own achievements, especially in the knowledge of its decisions made with a keen eye to the future in its plans for the next events, namely ISHC-11 (Scotland in 1998), ISHC-12 (Sweden in 2000), and ISHC-13 (Spain in 2002). These decisions are bound to be applauded by everyone connected with this sector. The establishment of a "Forum on Industrial Perspectives" is also to be welcomed, even though the first such event during the evening of August 13 came to a rather painful and frustrating end, marred by aggressive arguments that were most notable for their irrelevance.

But if the Advisory Board (amongst others) can take the credit for such good decisions, it must also accept criticism for its less distinguished activities. These give reason to doubt whether the Advisory Board in its present form

really wants to keep pace with the development of homogeneous catalysis or — what is worse — whether it is actually capable of doing so.

To allocate six of the nine plenary lectures to speakers from the host country and only three to foreign authors is not what one would expect of courteous hosts. Indeed, the only other events where such a practice would have been found were those dominated by the politburos of former communist countries — Brezhnev and Stalin would have been in their element! And criticism can also be leveled at another aspect, even though its main effect was merely on the general mood of the meeting. I refer here to the fact that some of the plenary lectures and also some invited lectures were known to have been given elsewhere on a previous occasion in an identical, or just slightly amended form, or under another title. Perhaps the Advisory Board was prompted by some urge to educate, and believed repetition to be an effective teaching tool: but what repetition patently fails to do is to increase the knowledge of an audience keen to learn. It tends to give the impression that the Board is not properly informed, or at least that the Board's collective memory is not up to the job.

The third objection is more serious: without wishing to place a particular value on homogeneous catalysis divorced from practical applica-

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tions the fact remains that in this form it is nothing more or less than pure descriptive organometallic chemistry. To put it more pointedly: in the eyes of the public and also interested colleagues from a wide variety of backgrounds, homogeneous catalysis is only justified as an independent area of study by the practical application of organometallic knowledge acquired. Not having *recognized* this is the Advisory Board's main failing. Its *unwillingness* to alter this (like the composition of the Board and its resistance to change) proves its inability to move from pure academic teaching to applications-related activities. From the very first glance at the list of the Advisory Board's 35 members (and one permanent secretary!) given in the abstracts of ISHC-10 it obvious that colleagues from the industry are woefully under-represented: in a minority of 10 to 1. Nothing emerged from the last meeting of the Advisory Board at ISHC-10 to suggest it had altered its selection criteria in recognition of this imbalance — indeed, quite the opposite.

Though democratic practices are not by any means an appropriate way of selecting knowl-

edgeable members of any international advisory board, tightly knit circles of insiders who operate clandestine methods of recruiting new members are equally out of place. When in addition the Board surveys the list of its members and concludes that a ratio of seven US members to three others from the Netherlands, France and the UK respectively makes for greater wisdom (as indeed has happened), this may be due to irrational chauvinism of an ISHC held in God's Own Country, but it is not a situation deserving to be left unchallenged

From these randomly chosen examples of the International Advisory Board's behavior, and that of its guiding intellectual forces, serious doubts arise as to whether the Board in its present form has not outlived its usefulness. Is there going to be a politburo for Homogeneous Catalysis? I sincerely hope not. Pure science and applied science must together establish a committee that eschews chauvinistic attitudes and points the way forward on the basis of informed judgment together with an open-minded approach to new developments.

Three cheers for the ISHC-11 in Fife!