

Letter

Response to the letter by Dr. Boy Cornils

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As secretary of the International Advisory Board (IAB) of the International Symposium on Homogeneous Catalysis (ISHC) series of Conferences, I was naturally most interested to read Dr. Cornils letter criticizing the role of the IAB in its attempts to maintain the field as an active and vibrant one by organizing the international symposia in the area every two years. As correctly pointed out by Cornils (one of his few real facts), the ISHC-10 meeting was held in Princeton, New Jersey, August 11–16, 1996.

To place some perspective on his letter, I will point out that this is the first conference in the series (first held in 1978 in Corpus Christi, Texas) that Cornils has attended, and he was invited to attend the IAB business (luncheon) meeting, held in Princeton on August 14, in place of W. Herrmann (Munich) who was unable to attend because he left the conference prior to the advisory meeting. Some 16 members of the IAB were present out of a total of 35 members. During the meeting, there were essentially no comments (certainly of a critical nature) made by Cornils, although he and Herrmann had proposed that the ISHC-12 meeting (in 2000) be held in Munich; however, ISHC-12 had already been allotted (at an IAB meeting in 1994) to Sweden. Concerning future meetings, the decision was made (by a vote) that ISHC-13

would be held in Spain in 2002, and ISHC-14 in Munich in 2004 (not noted in Cornils' letter); this was accepted by Cornils, but naturally with some disappointment. Now to his letter, taking his points in turn.

The aim of the IAB is certainly to organize symposia that portray the current status of homogeneous catalysis; the success, or lack of (both relative terms in the eyes of the beholder), can indeed be traced to the efforts of the IAB, as its members are those that volunteer to host the conferences, and this is indeed a major commitment as those who have organized meetings will attest to. The decisions for the venues for ISHC-11 to -14 were not taken lightly, and I do not believe that IAB makes these decisions so that it can "admire its own achievements". They are practical decisions and not necessarily "applauded by everyone connected with this sector".

The "Forum on Industrial Perspectives" was a new venture initiated by the hosts of the meeting, I. Horváth (Exxon) and J. Groves (Princeton), Chair and Co-Chair, respectively. This decision to hold this session was not one made by the IAB, but by Horváth and Groves (H and G); the local committee has to have the *final* word on any such arrangements, whether it is on a scientific or social matter — to solicit the IAB about such decisions is impractical. I personally applaud H and G for their efforts in inaugurating such a forum. That the event

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“came to a rather painful and frustrating end, marred by aggressive arguments that were most notable for their irrelevance” is the viewpoint taken by Cornils, who, it should be noted, was a member on the panel. His presentation, and those of the other panelists, have been summarized more objectively in a recent article (Catech. 1 (1997) 39–40); presumably Cornils was not impressed by some of the “less than complimentary remarks made about industry in general”. No doubt, all the attendees found positive and negative points about the forum; that’s what a forum is all about. If Cornils wishes to document the arguments he disfavoured, then I am sure we could encourage readers to fill a complete issue of *J. Mol. Catal.* with replies and related comments.

Next is the key criticism about whether the IAB is “really wanting to keep pace with the development of homogeneous catalysis and whether it is capable of doing so”. I cannot extol the virtues and talents of each of the current, individual IAB members, but such a comment is an extreme insult to the dedication and efforts of what I can assure you is an honest, distinguished, and hard working group of multi-talented individuals. There is a constant up-dating of IAB members (see below) in an on-going effort to maintain just the scenario that Cornils would wish for. The scientific community is welcome to view the past and current lists of IAB members (see below), and make up their own minds about the potential leadership or lack of. (Of note, 1 past member and 9 current members of the IAB of ISHC are also members of the current Editorial Board of *J. Mol. Catal.* Let us hope that their influence here is more positive than implied by Cornils!).

Next is the criticism of “USA content”. Suggestions for speakers were made by the IAB to the ‘local’ (i.e., National) ISHC-10 organizing committee; each member is asked to submit a list (31 responded), noting especially younger, up and coming scientists, particularly but not necessarily from the country represented by the member, and seeking out new developments in

Table 1

Place	Year	Total invited (#USA)	Plenaries (#USA)
Lyon	1990	25 (7)	6 (3)
Amsterdam	1992	24 (11)	8 (6)
Jerusalem	1994	22 (4) *	6 (1) *
Princeton	1996	28 (13)	9 (6)

* A ‘significant’ number of invited US speakers withdrew at a late stage.

the field. A collated list of potential speakers was circulated to the National Committee (15 people, including 5 industrialists, not associated with the IAB) who were asked to select names for Invited Speakers; from the original invitations, 5 were unable to attend. The final distribution of invited speakers, including members of the Industrial Forum, was Canada (2), France (1), Germany (4), Hungary (1), Italy (1), Japan (4), Russia (1), Sweden (1), and USA (13). For comparison, Table 1 summarizes data on Invited Speakers (with details on Plenaries) for the last 4 meetings, pointing out “USA content”.

The conclusion is that the Princeton composition was not especially unusual, although several IAB members at the luncheon meeting had voiced their concern about the disproportionate number of USA Plenaries. The local committee makes the decision about the final invited speakers, and this is the only practical approach. H and G considered that overall (i.e., including Plenaries and Invited Speakers) the ‘geographical distribution’ of speakers was reasonable, and that the final scientific program was a strong one, an absolutely critical point for a one-session format type meeting. (H and G also noted that the 46% USA content of the invited speakers was ‘in line’ with the 49% USA attendees within the 356 delegates). I was personally happy with the program, and I have heard or received *no other* complaints about the standard of science presented. I consider Cornils’ comparison with the Brezhnev and Stalin regime to be odious. What subject matter speakers decide

to present within a chosen session topic is out of the hands of the local committee or IAB — all invited speakers present background as well as new findings, and I have never been to a meeting where this does not occur. None of the delegates has expertise in all areas, and for the younger delegates I can think of no better way to educate. (Of note, 67 of the delegates were graduate students or postdoctoral fellows.) Cornils was obviously bored by “some of the Plenary lectures and also some Invited lectures”. I missed none of the lectures, and dozed off only twice. If some objectivity is needed, Cornils will have to document his list of repetitive lecturers, and I would then be prepared to organize and distribute a questionnaire to the delegates to either confirm or refute his personal feelings about these speakers and the general program.

The next criticism is the “over academic” nature of the IAB, and apparently this particular ISHC-10 conference. The composition of the IAB, currently 35 members, changes constantly (see below); currently there are 4 industrial members, but there are also 4 ex-industrialists, and most other members act as consultants to industrial companies. *The Chair of the Princeton meeting, I. Horvath, is an industrialist with considerable international experience.* An ongoing goal of the IAB is, and has been, to recruit more industrial members — the IAB is sensitively aware that industrial homogeneous catalysis is the lifeline for this series of symposia! The IAB does know that homogeneous catalysis involves practical applications of organometallic chemistry (at least *some* homogeneous catalysis), and to imply that the Board does not recognize this is ludicrous (and, of course, represents a further, personal insult to IAB members). Of the invited lectures, only 3 did not specifically include new data on homogeneously catalyzed reactions, and these 3 all dealt with very fundamental and highly important aspects of C–H activation. (Several, more recent, important industrial developments (notably polymerization of unsaturated hydrocarbons, co-

polymerizations of CO and olefins, etc.) have been topics of fundamental interest discussed at ISHC symposia, long before their industrial application.) Of the 20 contributed papers, only 1 gave no new data on a catalytic reaction. Overall, there were 9 oral contributions from industry. There are real (and obvious) problems in getting industrialists to present their recent new findings: the usual adage comes to mind — “if it’s being spoken about, the material is no longer of commercial interest, or else the plant is up-and-running and the chemistry is old”. Further, of the 125 posters presented, < 20 were of the “pure, descriptive organometallic chemistry” that Cornils would consider remote from homogeneous catalysis (and these delegates will have learned a great deal about catalysis at ISHC-10, and the presentation of some material by a delegate is the standard requirement for obtaining funding to attend a conference).

Finally, some information concerning selection to the IAB, about which Cornils has no direct knowledge whatsoever. There is “no tightly knit circle of insiders who operate clandestine methods of recruiting new members”. *No decisions on selection are made at the IAB meetings*, nor were they made at the Princeton meeting, as implied by Cornils! The board is continually seeking names of appropriate candidates, and some names were suggested and discussed briefly (and openly) at the Princeton meeting, but no decisions were made. For information, these names and any others suggested by *all* IAB members (by correspondence) are collected by myself and distributed to *all* IAB members, and a subsequent election is held; the votes are counted and the top ‘few’ are invited to join. So again I disagree with Cornils: this *is* a remarkably democratic practice for such International Advisory Boards and *is* appropriate. The new Board will be printed in the second circular for the St. Andrews (Fife, Scotland) meeting, July 12–17, 1998, and is likely to show about a 20% change in composition (we do have well established guidelines and mechanisms for removing people from the IAB). Very

few of the founding members of the IAB (1978–1980) still remain on the Board, and Cornils' derisive remark about "one permanent secretary" implies that he missed my comment during the opening ceremonies at the Princeton meeting, where "permanent" was defined as "not missing an ISHC meeting". The geographical make-up of the IAB is, of course, incidental to the location of the ISHC meeting, and will change with time. I should mention that not all people invited to join the board do so (particularly those from industry). We do not promote chauvinistic attitudes in any sense of the word (but we do need, and continue to seek, female representation).

For purposes of information for readers, I

give the names of the IAB listed on the inside cover of the Princeton program booklet: J.E. Bäckvall, J.M. Basset, M.A. Bennett, B. Bosnich, F. Calderazzo, C. Casey, D.J. Cole-Hamilton, E. Drent, M.J. Green, J.T. Groves, R.H. Grubbs, J. Halpern, W.A. Herrmann, W. Keim, X. Lu, P.M. Maitlis, L. Markó, D. Milstein, I.I. Moiseev, A. Nakamura, A.F. Noels, W. Nugent, L.A. Oro, J.A. Osborn, D.P. Riley, R.A. Sheldon, A.E. Shilov, H. Takaya, M.M. Taqui-Khan, I. Tkatchenko, R. Ugo, M.E. Volpin, K. Vrieze, A. Yamamoto, J.J. Ziolkowski.

I agree with only a single statement in Cornils' letter: "Three cheers for the ISHC-11 in Fife!"

Brian R. James' detailed response is praiseworthy for its clarification of the background and situation. Suppositions always lend spice to discussions and give the impression of extensive expert knowledge — although not always in every case. For his information, I would like to point out that I have indeed visited other ISHCs (the one in Leningrad in 1984, for instance); that I did not address the issue of the location of ISHC-14, as it is of no relevance for the topics discussed (and I am not a Munich supporter, and, what is more to the point, I shall have

retired by that time); and that the idea of my having criticized the local committee is entirely out of question.

What concerns me, and what is unconsciously brought to light in a quite exemplary manner by the minute description of the process, expressed in percentages, is the *attitude* of the IAB. The fact that certain of your members share by views gives ground for hope.

B. Cornils