

Letters: 'Ere we go . . .

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Hey, referee! William Bown's analogy between football and the brain drain was indeed apposite (Forum, 30 November 1991).

I was over the moon when New Scientist published my attempt to set the record books straight about government distortion of brain-drain statistics (Talking Point, 29 September 1990). But now I'm as sick as a parrot about your own-goal of an article which trots out the same old myths put about by those ministerial hooligans: 'British science is healthy . . . because it attracts more scientists from abroad than it loses' and 'the total gain . . . shows an encouraging trend'.

So, with an E-I- Addio , here is my action replay.

For example, figures put out by the Department of Education and Science claim that only 160 academics in all subjects left Britain in 1988, and that this was fewer than those who came in. However, these figures deliberately exclude postdocs and graduate students who, as most working scientists know, constitute the bulk of the brain drain - primarily because they were unable to obtain permanent positions in Britain.

They also refer only to those who are known by the universities to have definitely left Britain and, again, deliberately exclude the 577 others (those who are known to have left for reasons other than retirement or because they have taken non-university jobs in Britain).

Even with just six months of its rather haphazard chain-letter inquiry, British Scientists Abroad collected 10 times as many signatures in science alone as the purported 160. The US National Science Foundation also records that about 1000 scientists and engineers are granted permanent residency in the US every year.

Moreover, none of these statistics takes account of the quality of those who are leaving Britain and those who come to take their place. For example, the cream of Soviet physics and mathematics researchers is currently abandoning the former USSR, mainly for the US; very few of them have come to Britain.

Before the final whistle, let me point out a hat trick of other defensive blunders in your article. (1) The British Scientists Abroad petition from 1600 expatriate scientists was presented to the Prime Minister in 1990, not 1991; (2) It was to Margaret Thatcher not John Major; (3) It did not say what you said it did; that quote was from a letter by 72 expatriate Fellows of the Royal Society and Fellowship of Engineering.

As they used to sing on the terraces: ' Whatta loada rubbish!'

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