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18th October, 1962.

NI/62/12

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN NUCLEAR SCIENCE

GOVERNING BOARD

Theoretical Physicists in The N.I.R.N.S.

Covering Note by the Secretary

In connection with Item 7 on the agenda for the Governing Board meeting on 22nd October, Professor Flowers has asked me to circulate copies of the following letter from Professor Peierls to him dated 15th October, 1962. Professor Flowers says that the views expressed are close to his own and that Professor Peierls has agreed to the circulation of the letter to the Governing Board.

J. A. V. Willis,
Secretary.

Rutherford High Energy Laboratory,
Harwell, Didcot, Berks.

COPY LETTER

THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM,
Edgbaston,
Birmingham, 15.

REP/DT

15th October, 1962.

Professor B. H. Flowers,
Department of Theoretical Physics,
The University,
MANCHESTER, 13.

Dear Brian,

My thoughts about the National Institute's policy on theoretical physics are no doubt very similar to yours, but it might be worthwhile stating them.

I have always taken the line that it is important that there should be a definite and considered policy about this. I am, of course, concerned here with theoretical high energy physics (and to some extent nuclear physics) as opposed to the theory of accelerators, beam engineering, etc., which is a separate problem and, as far as I know, in good shape.

One possible answer is that there should be no theoretical staff and that theory should be left to the Universities and other institutions whose members, of course, would visit the Institute from time to time. This is perfectly logical, but I suspect it will not work because resident experimentalists will want to have someone with whom to discuss their theoretical problems regularly. Also, someone will have to think about meetings, lecture series, etc., on the theoretical side.

If it is expected that ultimately there will have to be theoretical physics staff resident at the Institute (whether Institute employed or on secondment), it is most important to place clearly the responsibility for selecting such staff and looking after them.

Here again, there are two obvious solutions. One is to have one person in charge who could be appointed on a part-time or full-time basis, and if full-time could be seconded or Institute employed, and if the latter could have a permanent post or a fixed term appointment.

I do not think it matters much which of these alternatives are chosen and they would, of course, depend somewhat on who the person is. I do think, however, it is important that a decision should be made soon on this, so that whoever is to take charge of theory at the Institute should not be faced with a group which has been selected more or less in a random fashion and in whose formation he has had no say. This was more or less what happened at C.E.R.N., and I think they are only just beginning to get over the difficulties created by this.

Alternatively it may be felt undesirable to put a reasonably senior person in charge, or the Institute may fail to find a suitable person. In that case, the alternative is to have a small committee of senior theoreticians (reinforced if desired, by experimentalists, or others) whose job it would be to think about the policy and who would be consulted about such junior appointments as might be made from time to time. If this is the line that will be taken, it is urgent that such a committee be set up immediately (even if the answer is to have one person in charge, which I personally regard as preferable, it might be desirable to have such a committee to select the right person and to discuss the nature of his appointment).

My main point is that matters have been allowed to drift for a very long time and that it is high time a decision was taken.

Yours sincerely,

R. E. Peierls