

British economy. The best guarantee of independence would be to take the initiative in solving the problems which exist.

DEAD DUCK INTO PHOENIX

STUDENTS of the Ministry of Technology, enemies as well as friends, must now acknowledge that a change for the better has overtaken that agency of the British Government originally created to foster change elsewhere. One sign of what is happening was the speech which the Minister of Technology, Mr. Frank Cousins, made to the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions on June 22. Almost for the first time there were traces of what could well become, with diligence and persistence, a coherent strategy to replace the rudderless philosophy of the past two years. What seems to have happened is that the Ministry has recognized how much of its work must be dull and unspectacular. In some fields, such as computers and electronics, it will have to lavish special care and attention until somebody finds a solution to the problem of how comparatively small societies can remain in the forefront of technological change without losing money. But the potential benefits of steadily increasing efficiency in less-spectacular industries are just as great, and this is the lesson that is sinking home. It is especially welcome that, in his speech at Torquay, Mr. Cousins should have gone out of his way to emphasize the promise of a link between increasing efficiency and increasing prosperity, for technology is not an end in itself but a means of living better.

Some of the tangible benefits of the new realism at the Ministry of Technology are the National Computer Centre soon to be started at Manchester, and the solid work on industrial standardization now under way. There have also been a number of recent development contracts which are at once imaginative and down-to-earth. The programme to develop methods of computer control for chemical plants is a good example, and of course it is entirely sensible that the Ministry should now try to make good use of the regional offices which the old Department of Scientific and Industrial Research established in the hope of helping industry to greater efficiency. Unfortunately, however, sweet reason is not everywhere apparent. The Ministry's chronic trouble has been the pretence that it could fly before it could walk. Traces of this old Adam are still there. Mr. Cousins, for example, was talking of the "Breakthrough Programme" that would be built around the laboratories of the old Ministry of Aviation as if he still thought office had put a magic wand into his hand. There is still a danger that the Industrial Reconstruction Corporation, which gives the Board of Trade powers to buy into private industries, will go to Technology's head. And the Ministry has not yet begun to tackle some of the great and outstanding problems such as industrial retraining. It is too soon for watchdogs to look elsewhere.

NEWS AND VIEWS

Plain Words

SIR IFOR EVANS, the retiring Provost of University College, London, put into words some of the current discontents of British universities in his address to the Assembly of Faculties on June 23. In particular, he lamented "the complete surrender of the universities to government finance and in so many insidious ways to government control. It has, of course, all grown worse since the Robbins Report . . ." But the trouble, Sir Ifor said, was not to be found in the report itself, but in the way in which it had been interpreted. By implication, the Robbins Report had become a licence for interference.

For much of his fifteen years as Provost, Sir Ifor has evidently been captivated by a vision of independence for University College, and this has plainly become more attractive as the forces of expansion and inflation have made independence steadily less attainable. At current prices, Sir Ifor estimated, it would cost £80 million to buy complete autonomy, and, though he is evidently hoping that a benefactor of such generosity may somewhere exist, most of those who heard him speak considered such a sum of money a sufficient proof of the necessity of the University Grants Committee.

Even so, Sir Ifor had a pointed tale of how in 1931 the College had to sell, for lack of £35,000, a piece of land which it is now having to acquire again for more than £1,000,000. He complained that the University Grants Committee in the fifties backed the founding of the University of Sussex because congestion on the sites of the London colleges meant that the "development in that area of a university institution is a particularly difficult and expensive operation". This restriction has now been eased, if not entirely dispelled, and Sir Ifor seems to have persuaded the present chairman of the University Grants Committee that the College should be allowed to expand outside its traditional rectangular plot, and that it should be allowed to pay market prices as well. He has had less luck on student housing, and confessed himself "astounded" that the University Grants Committee says that "not a pound of their money" should go on hostels. But he feels most strongly of all about interference from outside, and about "the imposition of regulations and memoranda that may ultimately turn the best creative and scientific minds in this country into mere university administrators, keeping their departments tidy for Government inspection, or the next round of reform". For his part, Sir Ifor said, he would have preferred to live in the "age of Rutherford than in the age of Franks". Because he is known to be a traditionalist, some of what Sir Ifor said may be discounted, but his break with the tradition of public gentility for the heads of universities could itself be an important move in the imminent tussle about the financing of the next university quinquennium.

No Pause in France

FRENCH science appears to be deliciously immune from the talk of deceleration of the growth of expenditure to be heard in the United States and the United Kingdom. The Fifth Plan makes it plain that expen-