

CANNABIS

Lords Debate Drugs

THE debate in the House of Lords on drug dependence and misuse, which was postponed until March 26 so that Lady Wootton could attend, cannot have encouraged those seeking a speedy revision of British drug laws. Lord Stonham for the Home Office said that the Government, unlike the Wootton Committee in its report on cannabis, believed that recasting the whole of the drug laws had priority over altering the penalties for possessing cannabis. Describing the Government's plans for a "much needed revision of the law", Lord Stonham said the problem with the existing laws was that they had been written before drug abuse had become a social problem. The temptation to plug gaps in the existing laws should be resisted until a single comprehensive code could be drawn up which would be selective and, above all, flexible. He said a subcommittee of the Advisory Committees on Drugs had been at work for several weeks reviewing the powers of the police. Another subcommittee under the chairmanship of Lady Wootton was investigating the problem of central nervous stimulants and hallucinogens and "we intend to consider further the recommendations of the Cannabis Report for a possible redefinition of the offence of Possession".

But how long will all this take, and how many people will suffer under the existing laws while a comprehensive code is being arrived at? All Lord Stonham could say was, "Much careful consultation will be needed if the new legislation is to be soundly based, but my right honourable friend (the Home Secretary) is determined to bring forward proposals without delay and we are working on them with this object in view. I cannot be more definite than that."

Later in the debate, Lady Wootton said she welcomed the prospect of a revised code, but she warned that the sanctions of the criminal law have not yet proved very effective. She also spiritedly defended her committee's report on cannabis. She described the hysterical reaction which had greeted it as a familiar sign that "the public senses that some critical and objective study threatens to block an outlet for indulgence in the pleasures of moral indignation". She resented the suggestion that the report advocated legalizing the sale of cannabis when it did the opposite, despite the strong arguments for legalization. These were, first, the argument from fundamental human liberty; second, the fact that, as the law stands, users of cannabis are pushed into the criminal world; and third, that the great majority of cannabis users do not progress to hard drugs. To argue that every heroin user had used cannabis is, she said, no argument that progression from cannabis to heroin is inevitable.

The three reasons why her committee had not recommended legalizing cannabis were practical ones. First, nobody knows the long term effects of the drug; second, it might become a social disease on the scale of alcoholism; and finally, there is no method of detecting cannabis in body fluids, so limits similar to those for alcohol cannot be set. Her committee had proposed lowering the penalties for possession because it believed that the penalty should relate to the gravity of the offence. To impose the same penalty for possession of opiates and cannabis is, she said, "to defy logic".

Parliament in Britain**Space Arithmetic**

COLLECTION of data from satellites is the single most expensive project undertaken by the Radio and Space Research Station, costing £173,000 out of a total estimated expenditure of £1,120,000. Mrs Shirley Williams, for the Department of Education and Science, listed Ionospheric Rocket Experiments as the second most expensive project, followed by the Chilton Steerable Aerial, Radio-Wave Propagation through the Ionosphere Experiments and Computer Services. The station has ninety-five qualified scientists and engineers in a total staff of 275. (Written answer, March 21.)

Weather

MR G. W. REYNOLDS, Minister of Defence for Administration, claimed that nobody at the ministry is complacent over the accuracy of the long-range weather forecasts, but declined to guarantee the accuracy of one-day forecasts. Mr Reynolds explained that the accuracy of the long-range forecast is estimated by comparing the forecast values of temperature and rainfall with the mean observed values in ten districts of the British Isles. One-day forecasts are, however, measured by entirely different criteria. A major factor in the decision to use the long-range rather than the 14-day forecast is the unpredictable behaviour of short-term weather patterns. (Oral answer, March 26.)

Medical Training

APPROXIMATELY one in three applicants for places at medical schools are accepted. Mr Edward Short said that 2,678 candidates were accepted for pre-clinical courses in medical schools in Great Britain in 1968-69. The number applying for places through the UCCA was 6,948. The cost of training a medical student from enrolment to graduation is approximately £8,000. (Written answer, March 26.)

Aeronautical Research

A NEW, low-speed wind tunnel is being planned for the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Bedford. The new tunnel will feature a high Reynolds number. Mr J. P. Mallalieu, for the Ministry of Technology, said that the cost of experimental and development work for the Concorde project carried out at the Royal Aircraft Establishment will be £6.2 million by March 31, 1969. (Written answer, March 27.)

Venereal Disease

MR DAVID ENNALS, opposing a private member's Bill which would permit compulsory examination and treatment of people suspected of suffering from venereal disease, emphasized that although there has been a steady rise in the number of cases of gonorrhoea reported, syphilis seemed to be in a decline.

Mr Ennals pointed out that when the Bill was introduced earlier as a temporary war-time measure it had not been successful. He felt that the "informant" aspect of the Bill could have very unpleasant consequences, opening up the door to blackmail, malice and practical joking. The Department of Health is concentrating on tracing contacts by interview, which is probably the most suitable way of attacking a very difficult problem. Sir Myer Galpern later withdrew the Bill. (Debate, March 21.)