

COMPUTER POLICY

Users caught in a Vicious Circle

DELVING into the obscurities of the British Government's policy toward the computer industry, as subcommittee D of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology is trying to do, is no easy matter. Last week's session saw the chairman, Mr Airey Neave, confiding how difficult it is to discern what government policy is, never mind deciding how the government should encourage the computer industry in the future. The representatives of the British Steel Corporation and Imperial Chemical Industries, both big users of computers, who appeared before the subcommittee during last week's session, served to confuse rather than clarify the situation.

One thing that is clear, however, is that the British computer company, ICL, is up against the fact that the IBM line of machines has fast become almost a standard gauge. The chief representative of the ICL team, Mr J. K. Steward, who is director of the management services division, confessed that the 2,000 man years of programming which has been invested in ICL's portfolio of computers—largely IBM machines—is a strong disincentive to change. The same sentiment was expressed by representatives of the British Steel Corporation, where, although there is rough equality between IBM and ICL, individual divisions tend to be committed to one or the other.

BSC, which appeared first, told the subcommittee of its plans to reduce the number of computers on its books by replacing them with IBM 360/40's and 360/50's. Within minutes of the changeover of places with the ICL team, however, Mr Eric Lubbock had persuaded Mr Steward to say how surprising it would be for a company to concentrate on these machines. To be fair, the BSC representatives were talking of their IBM committed divisions, beginning with the South Wales group, but if the subcommittee was looking for hints on how to run a computer installation it was clearly in for a thin time.

The representatives from BSC, led by Mr N. C. Pollock, director of management services, also drew some critical comparisons between IBM and ICL. British companies have been less reliable than IBM in the delivery of software, and the ICL business machines used by the corporation seem to break down more often (although it was not clear whether the one per cent difference in serviceability index between IBM and ICL is significant). BSC also alleged that ICL is being unnecessarily stringent in its restrictions on the competitive tapes and disks which can be used on ICL machines.

But neither team could help a great deal when it came to defining the government's present policy, although BSC thought the policy was more protectionist than statements from Mintech indicate, or deciding what government action would help computer users to break the vicious circle of dependence on IBM.

POLLUTION

Beware of the Drinking Water

BRITAIN's water supplies could become contaminated with unusual toxic chemicals which would not show up in the routine tests conducted by water authorities. That is the conclusion of a report published last week

by the Institution of Water Engineers (evidence submitted to the Central Advisory Water Committee, 10s), which also proposes sweeping changes in the organization of water resources.

The institution points out that chemicals of unknown toxicity are being poured into rivers and may end up in the water supplies. But water authorities are also faced with the possibility that illicit dumping and unexpected events, such as the accidental leakage of chemicals and oil from road tankers, could result in serious contamination. During the last five years 312 cases of source waters being polluted have been reported by 140 authorities. The institution estimates that about 25 per cent of Britain's water supplies are drawn from polluted waters and another 25 per cent come from rivers which are liable to sudden, unexpected pollution. The report concludes that "safety margins are becoming too narrow in relation to the increased use of frequently or heavily polluted waters for public supply sources".

The present method for dealing with unexpected pollution is that the appropriate authority is immediately notified, and steps are taken to shut off supply from the affected source. Such procedures are inadequate, the institution says, and although there can be no foolproof way of ensuring that unexpected pollutants do not enter the supply system, there is a need for more scientists, using modern laboratory equipment, to monitor the risks.

The institution is also strongly critical of the Redcliffe-Maud proposals for water supply and sewerage. It says that these "might well act adversely on the efficiency of that service and the safety of supplies", and proposes instead that authorities should be set up charged with triple responsibility for rivers, water supply and sewage disposal. Fifteen such authorities would control regional water supplies and drainage, and a Central Water and Drainage Authority would be responsible to the Minister of Housing and Local Government. The regional boards would take over the functions of the present river authorities, water undertakings and sewage disposal boards, together with the responsibilities of local authorities for sewerage. The Central Board would take over the functions of the present Water Resources Board, but it would also have responsibilities for water supply and sewage disposal.

THIRD LONDON AIRPORT

Unfairness to Foulness

by our Planning Correspondent

THE Roskill Commission, which is looking into the siting of the third London airport, has ignored the regional advantages of siting the airport at Foulness, according to the independent research organization, Political and Economic Planning (PEP). Mr Ray Thomas and Miss Anne Whalley, who prepared the PEP evidence, say that the Roskill Commission has failed to make a full comparison of costs and benefits relevant to each of the four short-listed sites—Foulness in Essex, Nuthampstead in Hertfordshire, Cublington in Buckinghamshire and Thurleigh in Bedfordshire.

When the commuting and migration patterns of people within the four sub-regions are taken into account, the real choice before the commission, if it takes a regional point of view, is between a third London airport