

Select Committee gets Under Way

by our Parliamentary Correspondent

THE Select Committee on Science and Technology has begun the first round of this session's main inquiries. Last week, the Registrar General and the Government Chief Actuary were the first to give evidence in the inquiry on population growth, and Sir Stanley Brown and Mr Eric Booth, chairman of the Central Electricity Generating Board and the board's member for engineering, respectively, appeared before the general purposes subcommittee which is investigating the recent failures in electricity generation. This week, representatives from International Computers, Ltd, gave evidence to the subcommittee looking into the UK computer industry.

Sir Stanley Brown said that the failure of the 500 MW generator units, which was responsible for the voltage reductions (or load-shedding) last November, was entirely unexpected, and Mr Booth suggested that the main cause of the failures was lack of attention to design detail. Both agreed, however, that if the generating sets had not been introduced quickly, Britain would have been frozen out of the world market for such equipment.

Responsibility for the failures seems to fall largely on the manufacturers, and Sir Stanley said that the board would not hesitate to order power station plant from abroad if British manufacturers failed to come up to scratch. The CEGB can, of course, impose sanctions on manufacturers in the event of shortfall in performance or lateness, but Sir Stanley denied that the CEGB had not been tough enough with the manufacturers. One turbine company and one boiler company have already been put out of business because the CEGB withheld further orders for plant but, because there are only two suppliers of turbo generators, Sir Stanley agreed that the capacity of both is needed, and that legal sanctions must be made more real.

As far as the corrosion problems of the Magnox reactors are concerned, these seem to be confined to small bolts, clips and straps made from mild steel, and Sir Stanley suggested that they are not a major cause for alarm. The corrosion has, however, reduced the output from the reactors by about 500 MW, because to run them on peak power now would shorten the life of the reactors. The first warnings of the trouble came from research in 1965, but Mr Booth said that the extent of the problem was not realized until 1968, when it was found that the interfaces of bolted joints were becoming corroded.

Commenting on the suggestion from the Select Committee's chairman, Mr Arthur Palmer, that the CEGB seems now to be concentrating more on reducing costs than on striving to maintain voltages, Sir Stanley said that he had hoped that the days of load-shedding were over. Failure of six 500 MW sets cannot pass without notice, however, and Sir Stanley indicated that further voltage reductions may be necessary this winter. That, he said, depends on the weather, and on how much plant is out of action at any given time.

The Select Committee's inquiry into the British computer industry will be undertaken by a sub-

committee under the chairmanship of Mr Airey Neave and will concentrate on the possibilities of international collaboration and on the functions of the government, both as policy maker and as a user of computers. It is likely that the Minister of Technology, Mr Wedgwood Benn, will be invited to give evidence personally and, in addition to ICL, IBM and Honeywell will be appearing before the committee. Mr Neave said last week that other interested organizations, including the Atomic Energy Authority, which is a major user of computers, will give evidence later, but that written comments from any source will be welcome.

Professor Douglas, from the School of Computational Method at the London School of Economics, has been appointed special adviser to Mr Neave's subcommittee, and members of the subcommittee all attended a computer appreciation course at Imperial College earlier this month. The subcommittee hopes to complete its investigation by the end of this session.

The other main inquiry, on population growth, is being conducted by a subcommittee under the chairmanship of Mr Arthur Palmer. It kicked off last week with evidence from Sir Herbert Tetley, the government actuary, Mr P. R. Cox, deputy government actuary, Mr M. Reed, registrar general, and Miss J. H. Thompson, chief statistician in the Registrar's Department. In a memorandum to the committee, the witnesses said that the latest estimate for population in the UK in the year 2000 is 68.2 million, and in the next thirty years the average age of the population will decrease. These estimates, are, however, based on many assumptions which, if proved wrong, could significantly affect the figures.

The average number of children per family has remained fairly steady at between 2 and 2.5 between 1931 and 1961, and the estimates for the year 2000 are based on an average family size of 2.5 children. Mr Reed pointed out, however, that a change in family size from 2.5 to 2.25 would reduce the estimate by two or three million. Another factor likely to affect the predictions is a change in the birth rate. This has been far from constant this century. In the 1930s, the birth rate was comparatively low. It rose during the war years and immediately after, but started to fall in the early 1950s. It then rose again in the late fifties and early sixties, but now seems to have levelled off. Miss Thompson suggested that the recovery in the birth rate may be caused by the tendency towards earlier marriage and the increasing percentage of women who get married. Immigration, on the other hand, does not seem to be a significant factor in the projections for the year 2000.

These variations in family size and birth rate are the reason why the estimates of the population in the year 2000 have differed by almost 11 million between 1961 and 1968. In 1961, the Registrar estimated that the population of the UK would reach 63.8 million by the year 2000, but by 1964, this estimate had been revised to 74.7 million, and in 1968 estimates had dropped again to 68.2 million.