

## IN BRIEF

**Nuclear committee move**

Democrats in the House of Representatives last week hammered a large nail into the coffin of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy by voting to strip the committee of its legislative power. The move, if upheld in the full house when it reconvenes in January, would break the Joint Committee's thirty-year monopoly over nuclear legislation, and it would place nuclear matters in the hands of the committees which are likely to be more critical of the nuclear programme. The vote in the House Democratic Caucus, led by Representative Jonathan Bingham, would divide the committee's legislative authority among the Science and Technology Committee, the Commerce Committee and the Interior Committee, leaving the Joint Committee as a deliberate body with no power to handle

legislation. Similar moves will be discussed in the Senate next month as part of a complete overhaul of the Senate committee system.

**Environment Ministers meet**

As widely expected, the Council of Environment Ministers of the European Community, meeting in Brussels last week, could not agree on Commission proposals for dealing with the discharge into the aquatic environment of waste from titanium dioxide and paper pulp plants. The difficulty, as on similar issues before, concerned whether controls should apply to emissions directly or indirectly to the environment receiving them. The Council was able to agree to a new five-year (1977-81) environment programme focusing on air, water and noise.

**UK-USSR agreement**

Anglo-Soviet cooperation on environmental protection is to be extended. The third meeting of the joint UK-USSR Committee on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Protection, held earlier this month in London, approved a plan for 1977 which includes the establishment of a working group on nature conservation, the setting up of a staged programme on urban transport and the rehabilitation and maintenance of residential areas, a work programme on land reclamation, and a study of possible cooperation regarding gas cleaning and dust elimination. The prevention and elimination of oil spills at sea is to be the subject of feasibility study. Topics are selected not on a basis of absolute priorities, but according to whether they produce a valuable sharing of information.

It is an old familiar story regarding industrial research that when sales decline, basic research is one of the first items to get the axe (rather than the President's plane). The justification is that accumulated knowledge is sufficient to keep things going for at least a while. In 1966, this philosophy became nationwide when President Lyndon Johnson was able to shift the federal support of science away from basic research and towards what is termed "mission-oriented research" or "research in the service of man". He said, for example, "We must make sure that no lifesaving discovery is locked up in the laboratory" (as if this were possible).

Professor Charles Tidball points out that the shift was made possible by anecdotal presentation of information to lawmakers. A factual examination of the background of "applied research" shows, however, that it is actually based largely on fundamental findings.

Decisions as to "what type" of science should be supported, or even permitted, depends increasingly on persuasive language, and today the language must be terse, so as to fit TV programmes. Slogans and phrases such as "environmental impact", "recombinant DNA", "carcinogenic chemicals", "endangered species", "noise pollution", "megavitamin therapy", and "world wildlife" are the current persuaders. They enable complicated matters to be put in neat little boxes that decision-makers can handle.

I was astonished to find recently

that one of the most popular persuaders of today, "food additives", is only eighteen years old. It did not become a category until the Food Additives Amendment of 1958. I regard the term, if you will excuse the cliché, as a pollution of the language, for most users of the phrase seem to think it means a class of substances. Actually

**Language in action**

**THOMAS H. JUKES**

it refers to a use to which diverse materials, many of them accepted foods, are put. There is a strong movement "against" food additives, and there is even an organisation "The Feingold Association", dedicated to their exorcism. The members are followers of an allergist, Dr Benjamin

Feingold, who has published a book (many MDs publish books instead of writing scientific articles) about hyperkinesis in children, and its relief, and that of their parents, by a diet containing no "food additives". I have not seen in any writings supportive of the "Feingold treatment" mention of the fact that numerous "natural ingredients" of food are more toxic than additives at levels of permitted usage.

It may be that Dr Feingold has found a way to rid harassed and inactive parents of that nuisance, the "hyperactive child", which, incidentally, is another slogan. But consider a partial list of what must be eliminated from intake or contact: apples, blackberries, cherries, peaches, cucumbers, pickles, tomatoes, ice cream, bakery goods (except "plain bread"), luncheon meats, jam or jelly, gin and all distilled drinks except vodka, tea, beer, wine vinegar, all soft drinks, aspirin, perfumes, toothpaste and toothpowder.

Is it possible that the goodies in this incredibly diverse list share any common biochemical or pharmacodynamic properties that make each and all of them inductive of "hyperactivity"? I find this postulation incredible, but millions of dollars will be spent to seek out the answer. I suggest that this expenditure is yet another example of "language in action".

Perhaps, however, sluggish adults should help themselves to tomatoes, ice cream, gin, toothpaste and perfume to induce hyperactivity.