CEGB change

The retirement of Sir Arthur Hawkins as chairman of the UK Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) at the end of last week has raised the prospect of an early resolution of the problem which the proposed Drax B coal-fired power plant poses. The issue is not whether it should be ordered, but when. That depends in the first instance on electricity demand, but other factors have intervened.

The plant was planned for 1979. The turbine and boiler-making industries face a lean time with demand down and want the order brought forward; the government's 'think tank' has recommended a rationalisation of the industry and this is still under discussion. The CEGB has said the order can be placed now, but wants compensation from the government. What is in dispute is the amount of that compensation, and who should pay it. The hope is that with the departure of a key

figure in the growing controversy, some new formula can be found to satisfy Glyn England, the new CEGB chairman. With the visit of Mr Benn, the Energy Secretary, to Moscow this week for talks with Mr Kirillin, his Soviet counterpart, no announcement is expected before next week.

On the move

Dr Frederick Horner is to take over from Dr J. A. Saxton as Director of the Appleton Laboratory near London. Horner joined the Radio Division of the National Physical Laboratory in 1941, which has since evolved into the Appleton Laboratory. In 1969 he became Deputy Director. Most of his research has been concerned with finding radio direction and studying radio emissions from thunderstorms. Since 1950 he has been involved in international radio affairs and has held office in international organisations. Saxton retires on 1 July.

The UK Department of Health will soon be losing its Chief Scientist, Sir Douglas Black, following his election as President of the Royal College of Physicians. No replacement has been announced.

WHO message

The World Health Organisation (WHO) should strive to achieve a universal level of health conducive to high social and economic productivity by the year 2000. This was the message of Dr H. Mahler, Director-General of the WHO, when he presented his report for 1976 to the World Health Assembly in Geneva last week. He said that the WHO should through its country health programming promote development in primary health care and appropriate health technology, even though in so doing it might meet with opposition from the medical and various allied professions and industries.

IN Britain, most western European countries and the United States, the so-called 'organic movement' is growing. Its members believe that 'natural' manures, derived from animal excreta or composted vegetable matter, are better than factory-made chemical fertilisers. The movement embraces those with widely different views. The more extreme believe that chemical fertilisers poison the land and those who eat its products. The more moderate consider that organic manures improve the structure and fertility of the soil better than do inorganic fertilisers, and produce crops which differ nutritionally in subtle ways from those grown with liberal dressings of artificials. They claim that pests and diseases are less rampant when organic techniques are used, though they admit that the highest yields are often obtained with balanced dressings of inorganic fertilisers and the liberal use of chemical pesticides. In general they claim quality rather than quantity for organic produce.

As an entomologist on the staff of Rothamsted Experimental Station, on whose fields the classical experiments demonstrating the value of chemical manures were performed, I was at first very sceptical. However, when, over twenty years ago, I visited the experiments of the Soil Association at Haughley in Suffolk, and examined the long-term experiments set out and organised by Lady Eve Balfour, I decided that this work needed to be looked at critically and scientifically. I did not have an experience like St Paul on the road to Damascus, with an instant conversion, and I found

some of the explanations of organic farmers and gardeners hard to accept, but I did think that this unique long term study, where comparable fields were receiving different fertiliser and pesticide treatment, ought to be thoroughly investigated.

I attempted to interest bodies like the Agricultural Research Council,

Muck is magic

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who were at that time comparatively generously supplied with funds to support research. I could not persuade them to part with a penny to investigate the work at Haughley, or to study organic methods generally. Time and time again my advances were rebuffed. Even when I got together a Research Advisory Committee, which included hard-headed

scientists from the chemical industry, no government money from agricultural research funds was forthcoming. In fairness to the ARC and my former colleagues I must admit that they believed that the subject had been thoroughly studied by established methods, and it was not unreasonable to assume that little more was to be discovered. Furthermore, some of the extreme organic fanatics talked such evident nonsense, and their more rational colleagues suffered by association.

Today things seem to be different. I was delighted to see a headline in the *Times* recently which read "Ideas of organic farming being taken more seriously", and to discover this referred to a lecture by a member of the staff of the ARC. Not long before I heard my former colleague Dr G. W. Cooke, recently the distinguished head of the Chemistry Department at Rothamsted and now also with the ARC, admit that modern work had shown that organic manures were now being found to increase some crop yields much more than would have been expected from an analysis of the inorganic nutrients present.

I hope that this will mean that organic methods will now be really critically studied, as I proposed so long ago. If the ARC sees the light in this way, they may wish to follow the example of the now-defunct Council for Scientific Policy. This body prefaced its last report with an extract from the General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer. I suggest that the ARC choose as its text Luke 15, v. 7.