



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26, 1929.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
A Parliamentary Science Committee	641
Petroleum Geology	644
What is Sociology?	645
Elementary Botany. By E. J. S.	647
Marriage. By B. M.	648
Our Bookshelf	648
Letters to the Editor :	
Electrical Excitation and the Possible Structure of the Plasmatic Membrane.—Prof. Henry H. Dixon, F.R.S., and T. A. Bennet-Clark	650
Photosensitised Decomposition of Ozone.—Prof. A. J. Allmand, F.R.S., and J. W. T. Spinks	651
An Absolute Method of Measuring High Frequency Currents.—Dr. R. L. Smith Rose	651
The Fine Structure of X-ray Absorption Edges.—Prof. D. Coster and M. Wolf	652
The Comma Butterfly in England.—Dr. F. Sherwill Dawe ; N. D. Riley	653
Electrical Phenomena of Crystals floating on a Saturated Aqueous Solution.—Nobuyuki Katoh	653
High-frequency Discharge in Organic Vapours.—Prof. P. N. Ghosh and B. D. Chatterjee	654
Dr. Augustus Waller and Patents.—Mrs. Mary D. Waller	654
Sexual Behaviour in Birds. By Dr. F. H. A. Marshall, F.R.S.	655
Molecular Air-Pumps. By Prof. E. N. da C. Andrade	657
Obituary :	
Dr. C. Easton. By E. van E.	659
Prof. Louis Capitan	660
Mr. E. H. Man, C.I.E.	660
News and Views	661
Our Astronomical Column	665
Research Items	666
The University of Liverpool. OPENING OF THE LADY HERDMAN GEOLOGICAL LABORATORIES	669
Stability of the Value of Gold	670
Work of the Government Chemist	670
General Paralysis and Malaria	671
Prehistoric Macedonia	671
Superhardening Hardened Steel by Magnetic Means	672
A Russian Expedition to Seistan	672
University and Educational Intelligence	673
Calendar of Patent Records	673
Societies and Academies	674
Official Publications Received	675
Diary of Societies	676
Recent Scientific and Technical Books	Supp. vii

Editorial and Publishing Offices :

MACMILLAN & CO., LTD.,
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON, W.C.2.

Editorial communications should be addressed to the Editor.

Advertisements and business letters to the Publishers.

Telephone Number : GERRARD 8830.

Telegraphic Address : PHUSIS, WESTRAND, LONDON.

No. 3130, VOL. 124]

A Parliamentary Science Committee.

THE Association of Scientific Workers has a number of achievements to its credit, but none more pregnant with possibilities for advancing the interests of science and scientific workers than its success in getting together during the last Parliamentary session more than seventy members of the House of Commons to form the nucleus of a Parliamentary Science Committee upon which it is hoped to build a body representative of both legislative houses and of all political parties. That the nucleus is so large, although less than one-third of the members of the Commons have so far been approached, is encouraging evidence of the growing desire of members of Parliament to be informed of the progress of science and the possibility of its more intensive application to the problems with which they are confronted. It was in this belief that Major Church, general secretary of the Association of Scientific Workers, and now happily once more a member of Parliament, approached them. The result justifies his belief. It is to be hoped that it will also convince scientific workers of the importance of supporting the candidature and otherwise assisting in the return to Parliament of persons who are, by virtue of their training, experience, and associations, in a position to voice their aims and aspirations faithfully and to know and evaluate the contributions which science has to make to society as a whole.

The functions of the Parliamentary Science Committee will be to accumulate and distribute to its members such information concerning the activities of scientific workers, whether engaged in industry, research, or higher educational institutions, which have bearing on Bills before Parliament at the time or on imperial problems of current interest. Periodical meetings will be held in a committee room at the Houses of Parliament, and, when desired and whenever possible, these meetings will be addressed by acknowledged leaders of scientific thought on subjects of particular interest to the Committee. For this purpose the Association of Scientific Workers has offered to act as the liaison body between the Parliamentary Committee and prominent workers in the main branches of scientific activity. That it will be able to act adequately in that capacity obviously depends on the enthusiasm of its members and the co-operation of other bodies, notably the British Science Guild and the British Association for the Advancement of Science. For some years past the British Science Guild has had a small standing Parliamentary

Committee through which it was able to bring matters bearing upon the relations between the State and science to the notice of the Government. The British Association seventy-five years ago formed a similar committee, and this committee remained in existence until 1866.

An interesting account of the activities of the first Parliamentary Science Committee is given in Mr. O. J. R. Howarth's review of the work of the British Association from 1831 to 1921. The project was first discussed at a meeting of the Council in 1850, when it was proposed to form a committee of "members of the British Association who are also members of the legislature". To quote Mr. Howarth:

"The first idea seems to have been that any person combining these two qualifications should *ipso facto* belong to the committee; but the obvious possibilities of complications arising from such a practice led the General Committee to limit the new body to selected members of both Houses of Parliament who belonged to the Association."

The committee was formed in 1854 and at first acted as the medium of communication between the Council of the Association and government authorities. Apparently Lord Wrottesley, who was also president of the Royal Society, was its first chairman—no mean asset—and it was probably due to his efforts that the representations made by the Association to the government gained in effectiveness.

During its twelve years' existence this Parliamentary Committee appears to have brought a number of very important matters to the notice of government and achieved no inconsiderable measure of success. In 1854 it stimulated the Board of Trade "to improve conditions and facilities for navigation, and for accumulating marine meteorological data on a large scale": it made representations on the principles governing the award of Civil List pensions in relation to scientific workers, and the allocation of accommodation for scientific societies in Burlington House in order to bring such societies into closer juxtaposition. The following year it produced a document dealing with the measures which should "be adopted by the Government or Parliament to improve the position of science or its cultivators in this country" (including reforms at those universities "which do not at present exact a certain proficiency in physical science as a condition preliminary to obtaining a degree" and the creation of a Board of Science). In 1857 it asked for the publication of the results of the trials of steamships employed in the public

service, and the sending of an annual expedition to the Niger. A request for increased accommodation and staff for the Meteorological Department of the Board of Trade, an application for an expedition to be sent to the Mackenzie River (northern Canada) and for the dispatch of an expedition under Livingstone to the Zambezi River, were made in 1858. That year also, although apparently without official support from the Association, the Parliamentary Committee referred to the "proposed severance from the British Museum of its Natural History Collections" as calculated to inflict a deep injury to science.

In 1859, Admiral Fitzroy was authorised to proceed in bringing to a practical issue the recommendations made to the scientific department of the Board of Trade on the subject of telegraphic communication between seaports of the British Isles. The same year the Parliamentary Committee was successful in obtaining government support for the dispatch of another African expedition, that under Speke and Grant, for the exploration of Victoria Nyanza and Uganda. Most noteworthy and fruitful in results was the action taken by the Parliamentary Committee in 1865 in arranging for Sharpey, Miller, Huxley, and Tyndall to give evidence, during the select committee stage of the Public Schools Bill, on the extent to which physical science might be introduced into the curriculum of the great public schools. "The bill did not pass," says Mr. Howarth, "but public interest was to some extent awakened, and it is recorded that voluntary efforts were made by masters at certain schools to add instruction in natural science to the classical course, while 'some of the boys at Harrow . . . formed themselves into a voluntary association for the pursuit of science'."

In spite of the varied nature of its interests and the obvious success which attended its efforts to secure greater recognition for science, this first Parliamentary Science Committee did not survive the death of its chairman, Lord Wrottesley, in 1867. This by no means implies that the Association ceased to bring pressure to bear on government to further the Association's aims. It continued to do so, and not without effect, but it is doubtful whether members of the legislature maintained the same lively interest in the recommendations of the parliament of science. This lack of interest may have been of immediate advantage to science. On the other hand, the removal of the subject from the sphere of Parliamentary controversy almost inevitably had the effect of diminishing public interest, just at a time when science was dependent

on a quickened public interest for the consolidation of the position it had occupied in face of the opposition of the protagonists of the classics and dogmatic theology, the representatives of which were still strongly entrenched in Parliament.

The revival of the Parliamentary Science Committee immediately provokes speculation regarding its possible interpretation of its functions. There is certainly no dearth of material to engage its attention. The present government, like the last, gives it plenty of scope for the exercise of its powers of destructive criticism. This government, in spite of the lip-service paid to science by the party it represents, has shown not the least disposition to give scientific workers effective representation on the important development committees it has set up. Neither the advisory committee which Mr. Thomas has appointed for considering industrial development in Britain, nor the committee he has appointed for considering colonial development, is calculated to inspire scientific workers with confidence in their capacity to appreciate the contributions which science can make to either problem. The same criticism, but with even greater emphasis, can be levelled against the constitution of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, promised by Mr. Baldwin and appointed by Mr. MacDonald. The committee recently set up to consider the preservation and creation of National Parks contains no naturalist, a stupid omission. Lord Passfield, in reconstituting the Empire Marketing Board consequent upon the change of government, has not appointed an accredited representative of science either on the main body or, what is still more surprising and unsatisfactory, on its Research Grants Committee. Mr. Clynes presumably expects the Licensing Committee which he has appointed to report on the alcoholic drink question to consider the effect of alcohol on the body and mind. Drinking to excess is manifestly harmful, but it does not necessarily follow that drinking in moderation is not beneficial. The appointment of a physiologist with expert knowledge of the effect of alcohol on our metabolism might have lent authority to the final pronouncements of the committee.

It is to be hoped, however, that the Parliamentary Science Committee will not be expected to spend its time framing and passing resolutions protesting against this or that act of government. The tendency on the part of governments to overlook the need for science to be represented on government committees of various kinds set up for considering problems, to the solution of which

scientific workers can make valuable contributions, is largely due to the fact that scientific workers themselves have not pointed out what contributions they have to make to the subjects under consideration. Where they have brought pressure upon the government, as in the case of the revision of the Patent Laws, the government has proved amenable.

Scientific workers should make use of the Parliamentary Science Committee to bring to the notice of members of Parliament what science has done, is doing, and can do, and what they expect governments to do to encourage scientific research. The encouragement of scientific research is not a matter about which the electorate can be stirred to any great enthusiasm. Science is essentially a non-controversial subject: Parliament rarely discusses, and Ministers rarely refer to, the activities of the research workers attached to the departments for which they are responsible. Expenditure on research is rarely challenged. This absence of publicity is neither to the advantage of scientific workers nor to the progress of scientific research.

It is high time that members of Parliament were better acquainted with the work of departments to which they vote fairly large sums of public moneys yearly. They should know something about the activities of the Medical Research Council, the Empire Marketing Board, the Development Commission, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, the University Grants Committee, and the research departments attached to the three fighting services. These bodies are responsible for the encouragement of research over fields covering the industrial and social life of our peoples at home and overseas. Much of the work done and in commission has a definite bearing upon matters before the Imperial Parliament. Members of Parliament do not yet appreciate this fact, not because they are obscurantists or unwilling to be instructed, but because no systematic efforts have been made to instruct them. Most of the above-named departments issue periodical reports, and these are supplied gratis to any member of Parliament who troubles to ask for them. That few do so is the fault of scientific workers rather than that of our legislators. Scientific workers have not yet succeeded in organising themselves into a professional body possessing political significance by reason of its representative character. Such an organisation is necessary if the Parliamentary Science Committee is to become a really effective body.