

NATURE

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GOVERNMENT INFORMATION SERVICES

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THE Central Office of Information was established on April 1, 1946, and take over a wide but closely specified range of duties from the Ministry of Information. Its first annual report* is of particular interest as giving the first available description of the general organisation of the Government information services and of the responsibilities and activities of the Central Office. The report emphasizes that the Central Office of Information is not a policy department, and that the responsibility for information and publicity policy in Britain always rests with the ministerial department covering the field into which the subject falls. Primarily the Office is a professional and technical service agency for nearly forty departments, being responsible for producing information or publicity material required by them, and being treated as the expert in presentation. It performs various other services which do not entail the production of material; but any general influence it exerts in the nature and efficiency of information services derives from its relative size and central function, rather than from its constitutional powers. Apart from the fact that the Central Office itself employs no staff overseas, a similar relation exists between the Central Office and the Information Departments of the Overseas Departments and of the Board of Trade.

In home affairs, material produced by the Central Office to add to public knowledge and understanding of public affairs has been largely directed towards increasing public understanding of the national economic situation. Here the Central Office is clearly fulfilling a recognized need for Government publicity. The Government has a duty to explain its policy and legislation; moreover, publicity is required for persuasive purposes in fields of safety and health and where coercive legislation is impossible. Nevertheless, it may fairly be urged that some of the Government action campaigns such as those described in this report have been weak substitutes for a courageous policy. There is a further educational function discharged by the Central Office in the way of providing technical and specialized information to assist sections of the public in their work and also in recording and reflecting significant aspects of the national life and achievement. Here it may be noted with interest that the Central Office has arranged a number of exhibits and displays for the Department of Industrial and Scientific Research, including one in connexion with the centenary of the Chemical Society. In such a matter the Central Office is in special danger of undertaking with doubtful efficiency what independent publicity experts could do better, and the Panel on Technical Information Services may well have under review some aspects of the work of the Central Office of Information.

That is, indeed, one of the main criticisms that can be made of the work of the Central Office of Inform-

* Annual Report of the Central Office of Information for the Year 1947-48. (Cmd. 7567.) Pp. 56. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1947.) 1s. net.

ation. The report could well have included much more detailed information about its own work and the specific functions which occupy its staff of 1,698 people in such varied fields as the distribution of news, the publication of books and periodicals, the production of films, and the conduct of social surveys, tourist and photographic lecture agencies, exhibitions, and Press and poster advertising, as well as the provision of what is described as reference services. The Central Office can, indeed, prevent campaigns from overlapping and can advise departments on the use of publicity methods; but, as the report demonstrates very plainly, it possesses no authority to ask the crucial question whether any particular activity is really worth while, and to counsel a department accordingly to curtail or abandon a projected programme.

This, however, is the critical question. As regards the necessity and value in general of the activities outlined in the report there can be little doubt. Such work must be undertaken by the Government of a modern State which seeks to command public understanding and support for its policies; and variations in the standard of performance of particular duties by the Central Office of Information are comparatively unimportant. The wisdom or expediency of particular projects is altogether another matter, and while the report reveals that the Central Office has not the status to raise such a question, the contents of the report alone illustrate how imperatively the public interest demands that such questions should be asked and answered plainly.

Unless the work of the Central Office of Information is to be wasted in futilities, its activities must be realistic and limited to projects for which a convincing statement of their public value can be made. The Government has already instituted an inquiry into the methods and organisation of information services. There is also needed, however, a careful and unceasing scrutiny of particular projects, such as the Select Committee on Estimates is accustomed to give, and which the Select Committee on National Expenditure gave to the Wartime Social Survey in a report published in February 1942. The present report includes a brief section on the Social Survey, which, however, adds little to the account published in *Nature* last year (161, 573; 1948) beyond listing examples of the collection of statistical data on the survey of sickness and on retail trade indexes carried out for the statistical divisions of departments and also examples of special problems into which research has been conducted. The latter comprise a survey of the composition of population and types of household in connexion with post-war housing in Glasgow; an estimate of the demand for war medals and decorations; an inquiry in Willesden in relation to the development of new towns; an inquiry as to the numbers of people likely to benefit from and use hearing aids under the new health scheme; and an inquiry into the social factors involved in the employment of women. In all, surveys were made during the year for ten departments. The work of this section again demonstrates that, in the absence of an authority at a higher level, there can be no assurance

that a technical agency—such as the Central Office of Information essentially is—will be wisely used, and departmental campaigns planned with proper foresight from the point of view of the expenditure of public money or the most appropriate means of achieving the objective. Below Cabinet level, there appears to be nothing apart from critical examination by the Select Committee on Estimates to prevent the continuing wastage of public money on schemes which may originate from departmental vacillation and failure to evolve policy properly co-ordinated at Cabinet level with the requirements and policies of other departments.

The weaknesses of the Central Office of Information are, by and large, not of its own making, and there is a danger that criticism of them may be directed against the Central Office rather than against the departments and ministers primarily responsible. It is not so much the quality of the work but its quantity that is in question, and whether the right objectives are being achieved. It would be disastrous if in the present economic situation there were any interruption of the means by which the public are informed of the affairs and the purpose and implications of Government policy and action. But efforts to secure necessary exhortation and publicity cannot be multiplied indefinitely as a substitute for resolute leadership and for administrative action which really grapples with difficulties. Further, such efforts must never be allowed to obscure the vital fact that only through some form of central Government information services, both directly and with the co-operation of the Press and other agencies, can public support and understanding be secured for the measures, often unpalatable, necessary for economic recovery and for social advance.

BIOCHEMISTRY OF BEHAVIOUR

Hormones and Behavior

A Survey of Interrelationships between Endocrine Secretions and Patterns of Overt Response. By Prof. Frank A. Beach. Pp. xv+368. (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, Inc.; London: Hamish Hamilton, Ltd., 1948.) 65s. dollars.

IN this book Prof. F. A. Beach reviews the literature on the interrelationships between endocrine secretions and patterns of overt response" in vertebrates, the purpose of the book being "not the exposition of a thesis but the supplying of a body of facts and references". These are classified under the following chapter headings: courtship and mating; reversal or bisexuality of mating behaviour; oviposition, parturition and parental behaviour; migration; generalized aggression; social dominance or submission, and territory defence; emotion; conditioning and other types of learning; general locomotor activity; homeostasis, metabolism, metamorphosis and moulting; morphologic structures employed in specific behaviour patterns; the role of nervous stimulation; developmental aspects; major sources of variability; and interpretations of hormonal effects. The bias of treatment in favour of sexual