

FUEL AND POWER IN BRITAIN

A DEBATE in the House of Lords on January 21 on fuel and power policy in Britain was opened by Viscount Hall, who questioned the policy of replacing the use of coal by oil, particularly at four of the new nuclear power stations, and also suggested that the nuclear power policy might need revision in view of the rate of development and the possibility of building stations that would rapidly be outdated. Replying for the Government, the Minister of Power, Lord Mills, said that current government policy is following the general lines endorsed by the Ridley Committee. He stressed the importance of the Scottish Gas Board's decision to construct a Lurgi plant in Fife for the total gasification of poor-quality coal; this has arisen from close co-operation between the National Coal Board and the gas industry. A similar plant is to be constructed by the West Midlands Gas Board to use deep-mined coal of poor quality, and as an outcome of co-operation between the refineries and the gas industry, surplus products from refineries are to be delivered to gas works and processed into town's gas. Coal still provides the bulk of the fuel requirements of Britain—more than 200 million tons a year—and he hoped that research and development will in due course create new demands for our indigenous coal resources. The Scientific Advisory Council of the Ministry, under the leadership of Sir Alexander Fleck, has been asked to study these possibilities.

In view of the present excess of supply over demand for coal in Britain, the Government has been strongly urged to reduce further the production of opencast coal, to restrict the increasing use of oil fuel and to scale down the nuclear energy programme. Lord Mills stressed the temporary character of the present shortage. As regards opencast coal production, the output is to be reduced by 3 million tons this year; further reduction would involve breaking contracts with an industry in which £27 million has been invested in plant for this purpose. The Government, however, does not agree that the use of oil, which now represents 15 per cent of the fuel consumption of Britain compared with 7 per cent before the War, should be restricted. This would be inconsistent both with the fuel policy of the country and with the Government's general policy of removing restrictions on international trade. The liquid methane imports mentioned by Lord Hall represent, he said, an experimental trial of the technical and economic possibilities. As regards nuclear power, Lord Mills regretted the suggestion for

curtailing the programme to increase the market for small coal. Cheap and abundant power is the basis of a thriving and progressive economy. Thanks to the work of scientists and engineers, Britain leads the world in the use of nuclear energy for the generation of electricity, but we could only utilize that lead by developing an industry continuously advancing the applications of nuclear energy by designing and applying reactors and associated engineering works. This would lower capital and operating costs, to the ultimate benefit of users of electricity and, although great improvements had been made in power stations operated by coal, we should reach a stage when the cost of nuclear power would justify our programme. Any practical results from the fast breeder reactor, of the type being constructed at Dounreay, were probably 10–15 years away, and from *Zeta* still further, but they are all promising developments.

Production of phurnacite has increased to 600,000 tons a year, but there have been setbacks in the development of full-scale manufacture of the process for binding anthracite known as shape. The Coal Board is now completing a pilot installation for the underground gasification of coal at Newman Spinney, near Chesterfield, and it was hoped that gas from this installation would shortly be generating electricity in a small temporary power station erected there by the Central Electricity Board. The programme of the Board for 1958–63 would provide new installed capacity of 12,800 megawatts, of which 10,730 megawatts will be steam driven, including seventeen new stations and three extensions to consume 25–30 million tons of coal a year when in operation.

On the matter of costs the Paymaster-General, Mr. R. Maudling, said in the House of Commons, on the second reading of the Electricity (Borrowing Powers) Bill on January 20, that while the capital cost of nuclear power stations at Bradwell and Berkeley will be about three times that of a coal-fired station, that of Hinkley Point will be down to 2.5 times. The present calculation is that the Hinkley Point station, of which the capital cost will be £120 a kilowatt, as against £145 for the earlier stations, will be marginally slightly more economic than a coal-fired station operating in the same area. Assuming 5 per cent interest-rate, 20 years life for the plant and a 75 per cent load factor, he believes that by the earlier 'sixties the nuclear plant will be marginally more economical than conventional plant.

SECONDARY EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

THE Government White Paper, "Secondary Education for All: a New Drive"* marks no real change of policy but gives some welcome assurance of continuity. The imminent but temporary decline in the school population is to be utilized to improve the quality of education, and the bulk of the new expenditure is to be concentrated on the

secondary schools. By the mid-1960's the worst inadequacies of the schools will have been remedied. There will be more and better school buildings; more and better trained teachers; and smaller classes. The Government, however, considers it would be wrong to dissipate the improvement in educational standards to be secured under this immediate five-year programme by attempting too much too soon. The main objective is to encourage

* Secondary Education for All: a New Drive. Pp. 10. (Cmd. 604.) (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1958.) 9d. net.