

SCIENCE IN PARLIAMENT

University Accounts

IN moving, on December 7, that the House of Commons take note of the first, second and third reports from the Committee of Public Accounts in the Session 1964-65 and of the Treasury minute on the reports, Mr. Boyd-Carpenter referred, more particularly, to the paragraphs in the reports which related to the denial of access by the Comptroller and Auditor-General to the books of the universities. While the Committee had before it much material in respect of the universities, that material was based mainly on information received from the Department of Education and Science and the University Grants Committee. Mr. Boyd-Carpenter questioned whether, with the increasing scale of public provision for the universities and the changed position of the University Grants Committee, which now came under the Department of Education and Science and not directly under the Treasury, this exclusion could be justified and whether its removal would really involve interference with academic freedom. He pointed out that in recent years the Comptroller and Auditor-General had had access to the books and records of the Colleges of Advanced Technology and of the Scottish central institutions. This access would cease when these institutions attain university status. The Committee of Public Accounts suggested, accordingly, that it might be appropriate to reconsider whether the exemption of this large and growing area of expenditure from accountability to Parliament was still justified. Mr. Boyd-Carpenter merely suggested that the issue should be re-examined with an open-minded and clear realization of the implications and that the universities should have the opportunity to express their views. In this he was supported by Mr. T. Dalyell, who also raised the question of the costs of research, suggesting the appointment, apparently under the University Grants Committee, of a small executive body of scientists, seconded for 2 or 3 years to deal with expenditure on physics, engineering, chemistry and biology on a national basis.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Mr. N. MacDermot, in replying on the debate, welcomed the Committee's proposal to look further into this matter, but emphasized the importance of ensuring that academic freedom was maintained, while we obtained the greatest possible value for money. It did not follow that use of the most up-to-date techniques of control and management involved making the University Grants Committee responsible to Parliament and, without prejudicing the question, he seemed more inclined to accept the advice and recommendation of the Robbins Committee.

Manufacture of Enriched Uranium

In a statement in the House of Commons on December 9, the Minister of Technology, Mr. F. Cousins, said that the Government had decided to modernize and reactivate the Capenhurst plant of the Atomic Energy Authority, so that it might supply enriched uranium for the manufacture of fuel for the second nuclear power programme. Owing to a decrease in the demand for enriched uranium for military purposes, and because the civil demand was then very small, it was decided, in 1962, that production of highly enriched material for military purposes should cease, and that of slightly enriched material for civil use be reduced to the minimum level needed to maintain gaseous diffusion technology. This decision was implemented by the end of 1963. For a nuclear power programme of 8,000 MW by 1975, using the advanced

gas-cooled reactor design adopted for the Dungeness 'B' station, several hundred tons of slightly enriched uranium oxide would be required each year. The Authority had designed modifications to the Capenhurst plant that should greatly increase the efficiency of production and had advised him that the gap between Capenhurst prices and those of the alternative United States source should narrow progressively during the 1970s. Other factors to be taken into account included the obvious disadvantages of complete dependence on an overseas supplier, since nuclear power would meet an increasing proportion of the total demand for electricity. Production in the United Kingdom would save imports costing some millions of pounds, and ultimately some tens of millions of pounds per annum. Closure of Capenhurst would make it impossible for Britain to maintain its expertise in this field, while manufacture in Britain would provide the Authority with opportunities to export slightly enriched uranium fuel.

The Government had approved in principle plans involving a capital expenditure of about £13.5 million, the first phase of which, to be started immediately, would cost about £7.5 million. These plans were expected to meet the initial requirements of the new nuclear power programme, and it was envisaged that the plant could be further expanded as requirements increased, and decisions would be taken as necessary. Work would start immediately and the modernized plant would be in operation in time to supply fuel for the first advanced gas-cooled reactor of the second nuclear power programme, Dungeness 'B'. Mr. Cousins commented that, at present, the difference between British and American prices for fuel was estimated at 10 per cent, but the electricity costs in diffusion were likely to fall, because electricity in Britain was becoming cheaper. The difference to the ultimate consumer was likely to be about 0.25% in the pound. If Britain were to manufacture low-enriched uranium, and if various types of station were to be built around the world, it was possible that Britain would be in the market to sell to them. The Atomic Energy Authority also had in mind the possibility of supplying tailor-made fuel to tailor-made stations. Centrifuge plant might possibly make present methods obsolete, but it would probably be by the late 1970s before centrifuge plant became a possibility. All the information available at the moment led the Authority to believe that it need not worry about the position for the next 10 years. The method under discussion provided opportunity for a changeover at a later stage, if necessary. Non-industrial staff at Capenhurst at present numbered 455, and industrial staff 860. When the plant was in full production a further 200 industrial workers might be required.

A similar statement was made in the House of Lords by Lord Snow, also on December 9, who, in reply to questions, affirmed that the Government was confident that the supply of enriched uranium could be increased to meet any foreseeable demand.

Social Sciences Research Council

In moving approval of the draft Social Science Research Council Order, 1965, in the House of Lords on November 18, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Technology, Lord Snow, said that the Government accepted, in general, the functions and powers proposed by the Heyworth Committee. These were embodied essentially in article 2(1) of the Charter and in the schedule to the Draft Order, which was drawn up in terms

similar to those appearing in the Charters of other research councils. The Social Science Research Council would be breaking more new ground than the other Research Councils, and its first task would be to decide in detail its own programme of activities and methods of working. It would not, for the time being, set up research units of its own and would probably concentrate initially on supporting research at present being carried out in the universities and elsewhere and on providing a focal point for co-ordinating and disseminating information. One of the problems facing the Council would be to define its own sphere of operations; however, economics, sociology, social psychology, social anthropology and political science would be its immediate concern. The Council would assume some of the functions hitherto performed by the Human Sciences Committee of the Science Research Council and the Department of Education and Science in regard to awards to postgraduate students. Arrangements for discussion with the other bodies concerned would include the appointment of assessors from Government departments, as well as the representation of the Council on inter-departmental committees concerned with research in the social sciences.

While regretting that the Council was not immediately to conduct research of its own, Lord Taylor welcomed the Order and emphasized the importance of the provision and operation of services for common use in social science, urging that the proper place for the Government's Social Survey was under the Social Science Research Council, where it would be available, not only for departmental investigations, but also for non-departmental studies.

In introducing a similar motion in the House of Commons on November 22, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Mr. A. Crosland, said that the Department now had research projects in this field to the value of about £1 million. Neither the Order nor the Charter mentioned the Heyworth Committee's recommendation for a special board for educational research, but this did not mean that the recommendation had been rejected by the Government. They regarded it as a matter for decision by the Council itself, and, so far as special arrangements for the field of the 'built environment' were concerned, the Minister of Housing and Local Government was enthusiastic about the objective; however, he did not think that the particular form of organization recommended by the Heyworth Committee was the most likely to achieve this objective. Mr. Crosland also said that the Government thought it was too early to decide on the exact relation between the new Council and the Council on Scientific Policy and also for the Government to reach a definite decision about the amount of finance and the number of postgraduate awards. The Council would have the opportunity of making its own recommendations, and it was not proposed to decide on long-term finance until the Government had had the advice of the Council. Mr. Crosland also emphasized the importance of there being more than one source of finance for Social Science Research, and hoped that the establishment of the Council would not mean that there would be less money available for, or less interest in, other sources of funds for such

research. It was not the intention of the Government that the work at universities, financed from the University Grants Committee or from other Government departments, should be limited in any way in consequence of the establishment of the Council.

In the debate, Mr. D. Price commented on the greater difficulty of isolating a situation for detailed study in social sciences than in physical sciences. This difficulty of providing or creating controlled conditions in social research meant that the quality of the people conducting such research might be even more important than in the physical and natural sciences. This was one reason why he hoped that the Research Council would give particular attention to the supply of trained research workers. He also emphasized the great importance of inter-disciplinary work, and suggested that the immediate problem was for more research in the nature of 'applied' rather than 'pure' research in this field. Mr. Price considered that this particularly applied in regional development and that industry would get a fairly rapid return from further expenditure in sponsoring applied social science research. Finally, he also urged the appointment of a Select Committee on Science and Technology to examine the reports of other Research Councils, including those of the new ones.

Mr. A. Blenkinsop, agreeing that the quality of research workers in this field was of considerable importance, directed attention to the desirability of such workers having had experience in various fields of the social sciences; these should not be exclusively academic. Mr. R. Hornby hoped that the new Council would be able to stimulate co-operation within the universities, as well as the flow of ideas for projects, and that it would have regard to the needs of other specialized institutions for finance. Mr. G. Howe emphasized the importance of wide and effective dissemination of information on social science generally. Mr. E. S. Heffer referred to the need for more social scientists in local government and in industry and also thought that all colleges of technology should have a department which encouraged the development of the social sciences. Sir Edward Boyle agreed as to the assistance which the Social Science Research Council might give to future Royal Commissions and the wider use which might be made of social science; he emphasized the danger of taking important decisions on inadequate knowledge.

Mr. R. E. Prentice, in replying on the debate for the Government, agreed that effective liaison and communication were basic essentials. The co-ordination of relations between the Council and the work being done in this field in the universities and smaller research institutions was a primary function of the Research Council. The Council had been incorporated by Royal Charter on October 29. The Heyworth Committee's recommendation regarding the Social Survey was being studied by the departments concerned. He also agreed that it was important that Parliament should discuss the work of all the Research Councils and thus help to create an informed public opinion which would facilitate the application of the results of their work.

THE NUFFIELD FOUNDATION

THE report of the Nuffield Foundation for the year ended March 31, 1965*, which includes a tribute to Sir Hector Hetherington, opens by emphasizing once again that the two recurrent themes of the Foundation's work are need and opportunity. The first does not decrease while men remain sensitive to possibilities of knowledge and human benefits, and the second will also be present so long

* *The Nuffield Foundation. Report for the year ended 31 March, 1965.* Pp. xiv+161. (London: The Nuffield Foundation, 1965.)

as those who have good ideas and the determination to pursue them will share their thoughts with the Foundation.

Allocations during the year totalled £2,045,741. Of this £205,730 was for biological research and £26,000 for other scientific research; £317,100 was allocated for medical research, £201,065 for social research, and £655,154 for education. Grants for the Commonwealth overseas totalled £182,276 and for fellowship and scholarship schemes, £188,588.