

TRIMMING UNWANTED SAILS

THE first thing to say about the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority is that it is a splendid organization. The second is that there is plainly a crisis on the way. In its annual report for 1965-66 (see page 110, this issue) the authority makes no secret of the need to keep some kind of balance between the effort spent on research and development and the national need for work of this kind. The authority has survived with credit the criticisms of those who argued, when the prospects for nuclear power seemed bleak a few years ago, that its operations should be abandoned because they would never yield a profit. The trouble now is quite the opposite. Nuclear power stations are being built all over Britain. There is every prospect that the types of power stations now in service will be able to hold their own for the decade to come, not merely in Britain but in countries elsewhere. It is true that other types are also becoming competitive, but there is no urgent reason why the U.K. Atomic Energy Authority should further diversify its programme of development. It is sufficient that there is a firm commitment to the development of the fast reactor system, and indeed it is important for the balanced development of the systems now being built and operated that there should soon be a realistic appraisal of the likely outlet in the mid-seventies for plutonium from thermal reactors. In itself, however, there is not enough work to keep the whole of the authority's staff busily at work. The problem is especially acute in the laboratories most concerned with basic research. For a long time now, it has been important to know what is going to happen to them.

It is entirely sensible that the authority should first have thought of taking in new kinds of civil research and development to fill the gaps left by the truncation of the atomic power programmes. It is just as predictable, however, that the programme of diversification should have been a modest but not a roaring success. There are serious limitations to the extent to which substantial programmes of industrial research can be grafted on to the work of existing laboratories. Because the Atomic Energy Authority is a public body it is not as free to engage in contracts with industrial concerns as a commercial organization would be—which is not to say that the Ministry of Technology should not take steps to liberalize the arrangements which have often made the conclusion of commercial contracts as complicated as if the issue were the future independence of the British people as a whole. But the most serious limitation of the process of diversification is that the contribution which the skilled men of the authority can make to the health of British industry is likely to be deployed most effectively in a laboratory which is much more intimately linked with the industry concerned than either Harwell or Aldermaston.

In the circumstances it is obviously necessary to plan for a reduction of the staffs at present employed in the major establishments. When skilled manpower is scarce, keeping the establishments at their present strength is not defensible. Industrial concerns of several kinds would jump at the chance of recruiting a great many of the men whose most valuable contributions to atomic energy have already been made. The universities and even the schools are also welcoming alternatives. Indeed, the recent traffic from the establishments to these institutions has been substantial and is growing. The most constructive policy for the immediate future would be to devise ways of making the natural wastage from the establishments more rapid.

Mere administration could do a lot to help. It is, for example, probable that a great many of those now working at the establishments, and who have never worked elsewhere, might be easily tempted to move if they were aware that industrial laboratories can also be exciting places—or can be made such—and that the commercial world is often kinder to its employees than public laboratories can afford to be. But why not arrange for the secondment of skilled men from the Atomic Energy Authority to establishments elsewhere, more or less on a trial basis? Because the fear of losing pensions rights is often a disincentive, it would also be sensible if arrangements could be made that people leaving the Atomic Energy Authority could easily convert their accumulated entitlement and their expectation of security to come into some tangible form. Finally, there is no reason why the kinds of retraining schemes now being prepared for workers made idle at motor-car factories should not also be applicable, in some form, to scientists. Although there are obvious limits to the extent to which a man skilled in some specialized field can be made skilled in a quite different field, there is much that might be done. It would be interesting to know, for example, how many of the people at Harwell and Aldermaston would welcome a chance to become skilled at the management and use of large computer installations. The necessary conversion course might well be simple to construct. The results could be of great benefit.

ANOTHER OXBRIDGE YEAR

THE vice-chancellors of both Oxford and Cambridge have begun their respective academic years with introspective and even gloomy statements about the immediate future, and this is no mere coincidence. At a time when British universities as a whole are under pressure,