

## MACHINE AT THE READY

THE British Government must now have finished the job of assembling the kind of machinery necessary for the administration of science and technology. This, at least, is what everybody must hope, for there is always a danger that reorganization, for all the inconvenience which it causes, will seem preferable to constructive activity. But now the old Ministry of Aviation is fast losing its identity within the Ministry of Technology. The Central Advisory Council on Science and Technology under Sir Solly Zuckerman is said to have met around a table on two occasions. On another stage, the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Science and Technology has begun to function. One way and another, the months ahead are likely to be full of bustle. It would be foolish as well as churlish to complain that nothing much has happened yet.

That said, it is only reasonable to keep in mind the doubts which conspire to suggest that the new machinery may prove to be deficient. Within the Ministry of Technology, it will take courage as well as good sense to bring about a rapid devolution of activity from government establishments to industry and the universities. From what the ministry is now saying in public, it can see what needs to be done. It remains to be seen whether it will be able to act as sensibly as it talks. The advisory committees will also need watching in the months ahead. The Council for Scientific Policy under Sir Harrie Massey has done so well in fighting for funds for the research councils that complacency may be the biggest danger. The Central Advisory Council will have more difficult battles on its hands, and its procedures are deficient in at least two important ways. For one thing, its proceedings will be private, which means that it will be less able than it should be to enlist informed opinion in its support. The fact that the Royal Society as such will not now be represented on the council is wise, at least as far as the society is concerned, but yet another reason for fearing that the advisory council will be working in a vacuum. Then it is not clear whether the council is strong enough, and well placed enough, to bring defence research and development fully under the same umbrella as civil work. The transfer to the Ministry of Technology of the Ministry of Aviation, traditionally the procurement agency for the services, will help, but the single representative of the Ministry of Defence on the new council may be a sufficient assurance that the services will accept the recommendations of the Central Advisory Council without further argument.

As luck will have it, the House of Commons committee may help to make good some of these deficiencies. It is bound, of course, to be some time before the committee has won such a high reputation for itself

that government departments will wait for its observations before making new policies, but the way in which the Select Committee on the Nationalized Industries seemed last week to have become one architect of the new policy on the organization of the Post Office is something to work towards. But, from the beginning, the committee on science and technology will be able to do valuable work by uncovering the arguments by which government departments and their committees suggest new policies or justify the old. Ministers and officials, who in Britain consistently seek to still criticism with secrecy, only ensure that it is often ill-informed. So everybody will be better off if the new committee of the House of Commons can be an instrument for enlightenment about the roots of policy. Certainly it should not fall in with the expectation of some officials that it will stick to uncontroversial matters. It should also take a particular interest in the machinery of government, which means that Sir Solly Zuckerman should be a frequent witness.

## PLAN FOR OCEANOGRAPHY

THE committee of the National Academy of Sciences on oceanography has produced a disappointing report (see page 957). Although it may give pleasure and profit to readers looking for new branches of research in which to work, it will not do much to help decide how the United States administration should seek to spend money on the development of oceanography. The chief reason for complaint is that the committee set out to formulate a set of principles intended to keep some kind of balance between oceanographic research of various kinds. There is, unfortunately, a danger that the rules which have now been suggested may become an obstructive precedent not merely in oceanography but in other fields as well.

The essence of the scheme put forward by the committee is an apparently tidy distinction between research of different kinds. The committee would like to see the National Science Foundation shoulder responsibility for what is called "discipline-oriented research", and the other agencies of the United States Government made responsible for short-term and long-term research which is "mission-oriented". The choice of short-term projects should be determined by "external considerations" including cost-benefit analysis, and, to make sure that the agencies do not put all their energy into a search for short-term benefits, the committee would like there to be an agreement on the ratio of short-term and long-term work sponsored by the