

NEWS AND VIEWS

Post Office Research

THERE is some sharp criticism of the research programme of the British Post Office in the report of the House of Commons Select Committee on the Nationalized Industries, published a week ago (*The Post Office*, Volume 1, *Report and Proceedings*, Cmnd 340, H.M.S.O., 16s.). The select committee considers that the time is ripe for a "major review" of the scale on which research and development is being carried out. Although it acknowledges that the Post Office is spending 2.5 per cent of its revenue from telecommunications on research and development (adding up to £4.9 million a year with another £0.49 million for research on the postal services), and that the ratio of the spending at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in the United States is a similar proportion of the total revenue of the Bell System, the committee nevertheless suspects that research by the British Post Office may be no more than adequate. It draws particular attention to the need for "long-term research and development on telecommunications systems", and hopes that the transfer of the Post Office Research Station from London to Suffolk will provide an opportunity for basic research on new devices and on the mathematical aspects of communications theory. Although the select committee has clearly listened sympathetically to the view of industry that research and development should be even more closely linked with the production of equipment, it would prefer a closer link with the operation of the telecommunications network. As things are, the value of research and development carried out by industrial companies amounts to £10 million a year, and roughly half this cost is met by the Post Office. The select committee also exhorts the Post Office to develop closer links with universities by letting more research contracts to them.

The most ominous passage in the report may well be that concerning the recruitment of staff. The committee says that there has been a shortage of graduates, particularly good ones, for several years. One consequence was that men had to be taken off the long-term development of microwave equipment to help with the design of the satellite communications station at Goonhilly in Cornwall. The select committee says that the salaries offered by the Post Office to postgraduate scientists and to graduate engineers are not competitive with those obtainable in industry.

A Select Committee

THE new Select Committee on Science and Technology met in the House of Commons for the first time last week. The committee has a Labour chairman, Mr. Arthur Palmer, and 13 members; 7 Labour, 5 Conservative, and 1 Liberal. The Labour members are Mr. Norman Atkinson, Mr. Tam Dalyell, Dr. E. A. Davies, Mr. D. Ginsburg, Mr. R. L. Howarth, Dr. David Owen, and Mr. B. S. Parkyn, and the Conservatives are Mr. Stephen Hastings, Sir Harry Legge-Bourke, Mr. Airey Neave, Sir Ian Orr-Ewing, and Mr. David Price. The solitary Liberal is Mr. Eric Lubbock.

Several of the members have qualifications, experience, or both, in science and science-based industry. Mr. Palmer is a chartered engineer and a chartered fuel technologist; Mr. Atkinson is a design engineer; Mr. Dalyell was secretary of the Labour Party Standing Conference on the Sciences, 1962-4; Dr. Davies gained his doctorate at Cambridge for work on superconductivity, and worked as a research scientist for Associated Electrical Industries, Ltd.; Dr. Owen is a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, and Mr. Parkyn a plastics chemist. Of the Conservatives, Mr. Hastings is a director of Handley-Page and the author of a book which criticizes the cancellation of the TSR 2 project; Mr. Neave has many years' experience of scientific and technical committees, and is a governor of Imperial College; Mr. Price is the Conservative front bench spokesman on science and technology. Sir Ian Orr-Ewing is an Oxford graduate in physics, and the Liberals are represented by another Oxford graduate, Mr. Lubbock, who read engineering.

For a House of Commons which is thinly populated with scientists, this is a fair showing. The committee intends to meet once weekly, and the sessions will be open to the public. Deliberations started with a discussion of the British reactor programme. What the committee does not intend to do is to conduct post mortems in the manner of the Public Accounts Committee; the intention is to discuss policy before it is made, and for this purpose it can call in evidence anyone it wishes. The Select Committee on the Nationalized Industries, with a similar constitution, established a convention of never calling ministers to give evidence, but the new committee has made it clear that it will not feel bound to do the same. The committee will make its recommendations in the first place to the House of Commons, although the intention is that they will filter through and influence policy-making.

If the committee does establish a reputation and begins to influence policy in an open way, it will be welcome. The new Central Advisory Council under Sir Solly Zuckerman will be operating in private, and all that is seen of the Council for Scientific Policy is an annual report. What these committees are thinking becomes apparent only when it is too late to influence them. The new select committee has the opportunity of showing that it is not necessary to retreat behind closed doors in order to influence policy.

More about Oceanography

EVENTS seems unkindly to have taken the gloss off the report on oceanography by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (*Oceanography 1966, Achievements and Opportunities*, National Academy of Sciences, \$5.00). Although the responsible committee under Dr. Milton Schaeffer of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography has been at work since 1956—it issued its first report in 1959—its most recent document was on the way to the printers when the White House announced its plan to create two new public bodies for fostering the development of oceanography—the Commission on Marine Science, Engineering and Resources and the National Council on Marine Resources and Engineering Development. That step was part of a spate of activity about oceanography which included a report on the subject by the Science Advisory Committee recom-