

Parliament in Britain

Select Committee

LORD ROBENS, chairman of the National Coal Board, is an appealing character. His long experience of the British power industries gives his views enormous authority, but he is no civil servant. When he gave evidence to the Select Committee on Science and Technology, he launched an uninhibited condemnation of British power policy. After declaring that he was only looking for the facts, Lord Robens delivered a peroration magically sustained from allegation to allegation by sheer flow of words. It was a fascinating performance, the more so because it was based—loosely, to be sure—on arguments which the committee cannot entirely ignore.

The Ministry of Power had been filled with what Lord Robens described as "birds of passage"; he himself had seen four ministers and three permanent secretaries come and go. On the occasions when they had not been actually incompetent, they had been shortsighted—only the present incumbent, Mr Richard Marsh, had the right idea. Apart from inconsistency, the ministry's unco-operative attitude to the NCB was "a nonsense" or alternatively "an absurdity". All this heat had been generated, it seemed, by the recent discovery that the ministry had in great secrecy set up a fuel policy working party with representatives from the UKAEA and the CEGB, but excluding the NCB. After firm representations at the Selsdon Park conference, Mr L. Grainger of the NCB had been co-opted on to the working party, but Lord Robens feared that the damage had already been done.

Lord Robens adopted a forgiving attitude to the first nuclear power programme. It had cost the country £500 million more than coal stations would have done, he thought, but perhaps it had been justified on technological grounds. What really irked him was the fear that the same mistakes were about to be made for the second programme. He pictured the CEGB and the SSEB rushing headlong to get approval for new nuclear stations before the select committee had had time to show them the folly of their ways. Seaton Carew, Heysham and now Portland were all being pushed forward as sites for nuclear stations, he said.

What in fact does the NCB want to see? First, an independent Energy Board, able to recruit its own staff and provide honest advice to the minister free from the warring interests. Under present arrangements, the NCB says, the costs of the AEA and the CEGB are taken separately, although both contribute to the cost of nuclear power generation. One result is that fuel costs for nuclear reactors are artificially low, the board claims. Secondly, the board has its own ideas about the structure of the nuclear industry. Some of the duties of the AEA—fuel re-processing and fuel element manufacture, provision of design data, and all research and development work which is near to commercial application—should be hived off into a separate corporation. This would operate as a commercial concern, leaving the rest of the AEA as a sort of institute on the lines of the National Institute for Research in Nuclear Science. This would soon show how expensive nuclear power is, the NCB believes. In addition, it suggests that the consortia should restrict their activities to construction, and "be relieved of the burden of research and development".

Was there any point, the NCB men were asked, in the diversification that was going on at Harwell? Mr Grainger said that he had yet to meet a single scientist from outside the AEA who agreed with it.

Organization of Science

Lord Shackleton and Lord Beswick, replying to criticisms of the administration of science and technology in the UK, attempted at some length to justify the organization set up by the Government and particularly the separation of ministries. Lord Todd was unconvinced. He thought that the recent creation of the Advisory Committee under Sir Solly Zuckerman indicated that the Government now accepted his view, though he still questioned the wisdom of making such a committee responsible to the Prime Minister. Sir Gordon Sutherland's report on liaison between universities and government research establishments was fine, Lord Todd thought, but there was need for a still bolder approach; Government establishments should be directly associated either with universities or with industry. The links developed between the National Engineering Research Laboratory and the University of Strathclyde might be even more effective, he suggested, if the laboratory were taken right out of the Ministry of Technology and placed under the control of the University of Strathclyde. He saw little future for Harwell or the National Gas Turbine Research Establishment as government research establishments and suggested that the latter should be put in the aero-engine industry where it belonged and should have developed in the first place. Why should a government station exist to provide research requirements for modern industry? We should rather stimulate the industry to put its own house in order. If the new Advisory Committee could establish priorities and assist in setting out government policy he thought that the present structure might evolve into one which was really workable. If it did not, we should not hesitate to change the entire administrative structure. (Debate, House of Lords, June 14.)

Construction Research

MR R. E. PRENTICE, Minister of Public Building and Works, is to establish a Construction Research Advisory Council. Its chairman will be Sir Antony Part and the members will be drawn from both sides of the industry, the appropriate professions, government departments, and universities and others concerned in building research. Its task will be to survey the national need for construction research, to review existing facilities, to consider measures necessary to encourage the expansion and more effective deployment of available resources and to advise on the dissemination of research results. Mr Prentice was anxious to dispel any doubts which had been expressed that the new arrangements constituted a possible threat to the scientific integrity of the Building Research Station. There was no intention, he said, of interfering with its detailed day-to-day working, or of curtailing its accustomed freedom to publish the results of its scientific work. It would be encouraged to preserve its existing contacts with the industry and its own structure of specialist committees. Mr Prentice added that research in construction was running at only 0.4 per cent of the output of the industry, against 2.6 per cent in industry generally; he hoped the new arrangements would stimulate more research by the industry. (Statement, June 14.)