

## Parliament in Britain

### Seen and not Heard?

ON April 17 the U.K. Board of Trade published the proceedings of a conference organized by it last November on the noise and disturbance caused by aircraft (*Nature*, 212, 970; 1967). The same day it took the first steps to match fine words with actions, when Mr. Douglas Jay announced in the House of Commons that aircraft operating in Britain would eventually have their nuisance value taken into account when certificates are being issued. The date at which this system will come into action is not yet decided, but Mr. Jay indicated that it would not cover aircraft already in operation, or, more significantly, under development. In addition, international agreement will be necessary before any changes in licensing can be made.

The conference report describes the ways in which noise can be cut down. Operating techniques can help a great deal, but in the case of Heathrow and Gatwick most of the gains to be squeezed from these changes have already been made. Insulation of houses is also already under way around Heathrow. The best hope is that designers will be forced to think carefully about noise before they commit their ideas to paper. It may then be possible to design quieter engines, or aircraft which can land and take off without needing to use full power. Turbofan jet engines, now coming into use, for instance, are quieter than the old type of jet. The sonic boom, though, is another matter altogether.

### Select Committee

Two arguments have so far emerged from the sessions of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, which is investigating the British nuclear reactor programme. Do standardized designs—curiously called “chinese copies”—reduce costs more quickly than technological development? And is competition in Britain provided entirely by the prospect of intervention by American companies? Giving evidence for the Nuclear Power Group, Sir Edwin McAlpine and Mr. S. A. Ghalib answered no to both questions. There had been development between Dungeness B and Hinkley B, Mr. Ghalib said, and the reduction in cost (£10 per kw against a cost for Dungeness B of £65 per kw) was more than the 10 per cent which duplication would have brought. As for competition, it was suggested that this might be intensified if different parts of the station were tendered for in a conventional way, but Mr. Ghalib replied that on the Hinkley project his company had obtained competitive quotations on the majority of components, both for conventional and nuclear parts. If this is so, he was asked, why is it necessary to form consortia at all? Mr. Ghalib replied that they had been set up at the request of the Government as the best way of developing nuclear power, and that nothing had happened which suggested that any other set-up would be better.

The committee also discussed the Advanced Gas Cooled reactor, and export prospects. At Dungeness B, Mr. Ghalib said, the Nuclear Power Group had not been allowed to deviate from the gas pressure and the fuel element specified by the Central Electricity Generating Board. One of its competitors (A.P.C.) had done so, in what Mr. Ghalib thought was something of a gamble, to get its first order since 1959, and had come up

with a much lower cost. Since T.N.P.G. had been the first to suggest these changes, and had not been allowed to make them, the C.E.G.B. “may have thought that they had not been completely fair to T.N.P.G.” In Mr. Ghalib’s opinion, this may explain why his company got the next tender, for Hinkley B, without the customary competition. Mr. Ghalib was not optimistic about exports. After describing the situation in Brussels where T.N.P.G. had not made much headway and there were “Americans popping out of every cupboard wherever you went”, he agreed that the problem was primarily technological, rather than promotional. The Advanced Gas Cooled Reactor should be developed quickly, he thought, and would then provide a system with as low a capital cost as the water reactor, and lower generation cost.

### Damaged Reactor

LORD BESWICK, for the Department of Commonwealth Affairs, said that the Atomic Energy Authority had set up a board of inquiry to ascertain the causes and extent of the damage recently found in the steam-generating heavy water reactor at Winfrith Heath. The police had been called in, but no question of military security arose. The Ministry of Technology had been advised that the damage was minor. In the absence of any other unforeseen circumstances, the Authority firmly intended to have this reactor at full power by the end of the year as planned. (Question, House of Lords, April 13.)

### Fuel Policy

LORD STONHAM, replying for the Home Office to demands for a national energy policy, said that the Government had never doubted the need for one. He maintained that the Ministry of Power was sufficiently well staffed to devise a satisfactory policy; more than one-third of its staff was technical, and of this 680 about 350 were qualified scientists, engineers and technologists, or five times the number of graduate administrative staff. Lord Stonham said that the Ministry was still considering the information accumulated in the recent review, which would enable policy to be considered in a comprehensive framework. Models of the fuel sector of the economy were being developed which would provide a much fuller understanding of the interaction of the various factors of supply and demand for various fuels and permit a better assessment of the effects of different policies.

On natural gas, Lord Stonham said that since drilling first started in the North Sea two years ago, 52 wells had been drilled, ten of which had started this year. He was now convinced that the North Sea could produce at least 2,000 million cubic feet of gas a day by 1970, or a little less than 10 per cent of total British energy requirements. To begin with, the supplies available in 1970–71 would be at least double the present average daily demand for gas in the United Kingdom, but, because natural gas has twice the calorific value of town gas, appliances would require conversion for satisfactory operation: the estimated cost of this was some £400 million.

The Algerian gas pipe-line from Canvey Island to Manchester and Leeds already linked eight of the twelve Area Gas Boards and would form the backbone of the natural gas transmission system: it would be connected to coastal landing points by feeder lines (Debate, House of Lords, April 13.)