

## OIL AND AFTER

THE first detailed report by O'Sullivan and Richardson (page 448, this issue) of the state of the Cornish beaches after the Torrey Canyon went aground on March 18 is a preliminary document but not to be despised on that account. For one thing, it is enterprising that it has been produced quickly at a time when a little information can do a lot to help. But there are also signs that this report shows accurately the way in which the wind is blowing. The Marine Biological Laboratory at Plymouth, which is carrying out a more extended series of observations and which plans to report on them in a month or so, said in a statement earlier this week that "many of the laboratory's findings confirm much of Mr. O'Sullivan's report". Although at this stage it would clearly be wrong to assume that the gloomy picture of conditions inshore after the oil and detergents had reached the beaches will be followed by a similar account of events at sea, there has evidently been serious damage to marine fauna living between the high and low water marks.

All this conflicts oddly with the sense of contentment which seems to prevail among the Government's spokesmen on the subject. Thus the Home Secretary told the House of Commons on April 10 that "close inshore, where it was thought that shellfish might be affected, only very few crabs and other shore haunting fish have been found dead". This does not sound like a description of the beaches visited by O'Sullivan and Richardson. Much, of course, may turn on precisely what is meant by serious damage, and it is also true that the investigation of the aftermath in Cornwall will be impoverished by the lack of good controls—which is why it is particularly helpful that O'Sullivan and Richardson returned to one of the places they had investigated after the tide had come and gone. And it is also true that serious damage a few days after the arrival of pollution does not necessarily imply a lasting scar on the marine ecology of Cornwall.

Why, then, is the Government talking as if it would like to underplay the damage? Neither the Prime Minister nor the Home Secretary was responsible for the grounding of the Torrey Canyon. Not even Sir Solly Zuckerman is to blame. Indeed, the assurances which the Government would now give are out of tune with its righteous although pointless anger immediately after the accident, when fists were being shaken at flags of convenience, and when the Government resolved somehow to sue somebody for damages—and to convene a conference to make it easier to sue in future. It is true that since then the floating rafts of oil have dispersed, partly by the actions of detergents, so that there is now little scope for energetic activity, although there are troops still waiting on the Cornish beaches to plough between the high and low water marks. Those with charitable inclinations will know that British governments are almost compelled by the parliamentary system to explain inactivity by the absence of a

need to act. In other words, there is a natural tendency towards complacency interrupted by periods of rushing about, and this is naturally strengthened by the wish to give some comfort to the holiday industry in Cornwall. But there will be more holiday seasons than the one immediately ahead, and in the long run the Government will not gain but lose if it is too optimistic.

## IS WEATHER PREDICTABLE?

THE president of the Royal Meteorological Society was clearly not bent on winning friends with his presidential address, reported briefly on page 443. Indeed, the chances are that what he has been saying will bring consternation and controversy to a booming sector of meteorology. Those with cheque books in their hands will be made to hesitate. Those hard at work on the establishment of networks for the collection of meteorological data in the belief that this is a necessary preliminary for long distance forecasting will be made to pause and ask what they are doing. The essence of what Dr. Robinson was saying is that precisely such an outcome would be prudent, to say the least of it. As long as there are doubts about the philosophical basis of long-term numerical forecasting, it is evidently rash to rush headlong into hardware.

Before meteorologists allow themselves to be locked in fierce discussion of Dr. Robinson's sceptical analysis, it would be well if they would pay some attention to the important issues of principle which his address has raised. Even if closer study should suggest that Dr. Robinson has been too gloomy, it is disturbing that plans should have been laid in such detail, and then carried so far on the road to application, without careful consideration being given to the likely benefits and the cost thereof. At least a part of the trouble is that projects with an international flavour seem to be looked at less critically than projects undertaken on a national basis. On the face of things, of course, all this looks sensible. In planning international ventures, there is a tendency to count on the credit side of the balance sheet the intangible benefits, in understanding and in political amity, which can be expected to flow from international collaboration. This calculation is sensible enough, no doubt, but it leaves out of account the certainty that an unsuccessful collaborative project can do at least as much damage as good. It is only necessary to recall what has happened in Europe about the European Launcher Development Organization, and to think what may happen if the Concord programme goes further awry, to realize that the planning of international projects requires that there should be rigorous safeguards against failure. In this context, of course, there are many circumstances in which partial success is tantamount to failure.