

Parliament in Britain

Select Committee

THE Central Electricity Generating Board must be sorry that it abandoned competitive tendering when it placed the order for Hinkley *B* nuclear power station. Since then people have hardly stopped talking about it. The Select Committee on Science and Technology had another go at Mr. Stanley Brown of the C.E.G.B. on May 4. Atomic Power Construction, he said, had been fully stretched at the time, building Dungeness *B*, and Nuclear Design and Construction was not ready to put in a tender. The Nuclear Power Group, on the other hand, was well placed, and the "exceptional" step was taken of directly negotiating a contract with it and, as Mr. Brown put it, "evolving to a price". It was true, he said, that A.P.C. had put in a lower estimate, and that the start of building had been delayed by one year by the reluctance of the Ministry of Power to give approval for the capital expenditure, but even so it was not possible to take the A.P.C. bid seriously.

In any case, Mr. Brown added, conventional estimates were grossly misleading—prices given without the discipline of building the station were worthless. The A.P.C. claim—£81 per kilowatt against the N.P.G. price of £87—was, he implied, shrewd public relations rather than hard financial bargaining. A.P.C. had not put in such a startling bid for Hunterston *B*.

Mr. Brown made some interesting claims for the availability of British nuclear stations. Excluding Trawsfynydd (which seems to have suffered one disaster after another), British stations are available 63 per cent of the time in their first year, against 46 per cent for stations in the U.S., and 85 per cent of the time in their fifth year, against 56 per cent in the U.S. The very high cost of outage (the times during which stations are out of service) showed how important this was.

Turnkey contracts would go, Mr. Brown thought; indeed, the C.E.G.B. had contemplated abandoning them for the A.G.R. programme, but had decided against it. The Dungeness *B* appraisal had established the facts about the boiling water reactor, he said, and since the Dungeness contract tenders for B.W.R.s had not been sought. Despite the Hinkley affair, Mr. Brown repeated the belief of the C.E.G.B. that competition is valuable, and could not be provided solely by the distant threat of American companies. All future stations, he said firmly, would be put out to tender.

Data Processing

WHEN the Post Office (Data Processing Service) Bill received its second reading (*Nature*, 214, 553; 1967), Dr. J. Bray said that the Post Office was securing a return of 12–40 per cent on its existing computer installations. He saw no likelihood whatever of a monopoly situation developing in the use of computers or in the provision of computer services. On the contrary, keen competition with small and active private bureaux was probable. (Debate, May 3.)

Nuclear Power

LORD BESWICK, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, said that comparisons of unit generating costs by Mr. Duncan Burn in his book *The Political Economy of Nuclear Energy* (*Nature*, 214, 547; 1967) were vitiated by failure to ensure strict comparability both in the financial and operating

conditions and in the physical environment of the station. Lord Beswick added that in this country a life of 20 years was assumed for the generating station and a load factor of 75 per cent, against the 30 year life and 85 per cent load factor assumed in the United States. On the U.S. basis, even the last few stations built under the Magnox programme would be producing cheaper electricity than their coal-fired contemporaries. (Statement, House of Lords, May 4.)

Antarctic Treaty

THE Antarctic Treaty Bill, which received its second reading in the House of Lords on the motion of the Bishop of Norwich, is intended to give effect to the measures for the conservation of Antarctic flora and fauna which the twelve Antarctic Treaty governments approved at a consultative meeting in Brussels in 1964. Clause 1 prohibits without a permit the killing, injuring, molesting or taking of native birds or mammals and is designed primarily for the protection of six species of seal and four species of penguin, as well as ten species of birds which fly and nest in the Antarctic, particularly the shags, petrels, gulls, terns and skuas. Under Clause 4 the Secretary of State would be able to issue permits to allow animals to be taken to provide specimens for scientific research for zoos and museums and will be authorized to delegate his powers in this respect to the Director of the British Antarctic Survey and also to leaders of the British Antarctic Survey stations and of other British expeditions. (Debate, House of Lords, May 1.)

Statistics

THE Fourth Report from the Estimates Committee and the Ninth Special Report from the Estimates Committee relating to Government Statistical Services were debated by the House of Commons. Generally the reports were welcomed by the House, particularly the recommendations for improving the career prospects and standing of statisticians in Government service, for standardization and for a comprehensive public guide to official and semi-official statistics. Mr. P. Shore, Joint Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, admitted the need for more statistical information and said that while there were in April 1967 251 established posts for statisticians, compared with 169 at the end of 1964, 52 were unfilled: adequate trained manpower was essential for most of the changes and improvements the Government sought to make in the statistical service, and efforts were being made to encourage recruitment by schemes such as the cadet statistician scheme for postgraduate training and a bursary scheme under which suitable people were sent to a university for a professional course. On the collection of key statistics Mr. Shore said that there must be an end to the present situation which made it difficult to relate information collected by the Board of Trade with that collected by the Minister of Labour; this was a key objective in improving Government statistics. He referred to the importance of the Family Expenditure Survey and said that this year it was hoped to survey 10,000 homes. They were also trying to bring together earnings figures for wages and salaries and to compile sub-regional as well as regional earnings figures. The reports and the debate, he said, marked the beginning of a sustained drive to improve our statistical services for both Government and industry. (Debate, May 4.)