

EAST OF SUEZ

THERE will be a great deal of sympathy for poor Mr Denis Healey, the British Secretary of State for Defence, who has for several months been under attack from members of his own political party for what is alleged to be a muddled policy for British deployment east of Suez. Patiently, and with due care for cost, Mr Healey and his advisers have been making plans for the future of their far eastern operation when Aden becomes an independent state in 1968. The problem is how to arrange that aircraft should be able to fly to and from the Far East without falling into the Indian Ocean for lack of fuel. The notion that aircraft carriers might lend strategic mobility to strike aircraft has been seriously considered and officially rejected, although the carrier lobby still has powerful adherents. Instead, the most favoured solution is that islands in the Indian Ocean should be fitted out with airstrips and used as staging posts in the rapid eastward (or westward) passage of aircraft the range of which is necessarily limited. Hats must have been thrown in the air at the Ministry of Defence on the day it was discovered that the oceanic island of Aldabra is conveniently placed off the coast of East Africa. The irony now is that Mr Healey has to contend not with those who criticize his defence policy but with the conservationists led, for once at least, by the formidable president of the Royal Society (see page 965). Only Mr Healey can say which experience is the more alarming.

Whatever he may say, there is, of course, no question that the building of an airstrip on Aldabra would be entirely indefensible. The Royal Society has done well to argue the case for total preservation. Its memorandum on Aldabra cogently puts paid to any notion that there might be some balanced coexistence between the military and the island ecosystem which at present occupies the part of Aldabra reef still isolated from interference. Experience elsewhere shows how little disturbance there has to be for the ecology of an oceanic island to be entirely transformed. At the same time the memorandum is admirably restrained. There is nothing in it to suggest a conviction that all things soft and cuddly are entitled to perpetual protection from people and even from each other. The case for Aldabra is that the island is one of a handful of places where the ecology is at once distinctive and comparatively simple. Careful study would be illuminating. By comparison, the spattering of post-glacial flowers which interfered for a time last year with a proposal to build a reservoir at Cow Green in the north of England was almost a triviality. To build an airstrip on Aldabra will be an intolerable offence.

What, then, will happen? Mr Healey is plainly taking care to keep freedom to manoeuvre. Indeed, his reply to the Royal Society contains the ominous statement that other islands in the neighbourhood

have already been rejected as potential airstrips. Only a few months ago (see *Nature*, 213, 854; 1967) Mr Healey was supposed still to be considering alternatives. If the plan for building any kind of airstrip in the Indian Ocean is to go forward, he should be required to explain not merely why the other atolls will not do, but what the extra cost of using them would be. The military advantages of Aldabra, however great, cannot be decisive in an absolute sense. It would be intolerable if some entirely unimportant consideration—a few extra million pounds, or a few more minutes on an air journey half-way around the world, were to put the ecology of Aldabra beyond ken for good. All this implies that Mr Healey must be pressed to carry out a cost benefit analysis which takes proper account of the scientific importance of Aldabra. Even if he should find himself being driven to think again of aircraft carriers, he should not be allowed to dodge the issue.

TECHNOLOGY GAP AGAIN

EUROPEAN views about the phenomenon unfortunately called the technology gap are rapidly becoming more rational, and the meeting of the European Round Table in Turin last week will have helped a great deal. The address by Dr A. C. Copisarow, the substance of which appears on page 966, is one example of how the frequently fashionable European view that real prosperity is made unattainable by cruel luck will eventually be exorcised. The truth is, of course, that innovation does not automatically bring rewards. It is possible to invent quite remarkable things such as penicillin, magnetron valves and swing-wing aircraft and then fail to make an appreciable profit from them. In the past there has been a temptation in Europe to believe that cleverness is a kind of virtue which entitles those who possess it to economic security. What is now happening, slowly perhaps, is that those concerned with the allocation of resources to science and technology are beginning to recognize that sheer innovation is only a small part in the relationship between science and economic growth. By itself, indeed, innovation is worse than useless, for it consumes resources and sometimes provides economic competitors with gratuitous advantages. If a nation is to use science and technology to create usable resources, it must be at least as much concerned with issues which have little to do with laboratory research as such, and which range from broad social issues such as educational policy to much more specific matters such as market research and taxation policy.

It is ironical that the airing given to these notions at Turin should have coincided with the conference last weekend in Britain of the National Association of