

NEWS AND VIEWS

Graceful Decline

THE National Coal Board seems to be presiding successfully over the gradual contraction of the coal industry in Britain. The board's annual report for the year ending on March 31, 1967, shows a small profit of £0.3 million, after the payment to the Government of £28.2 million interest, which is a tiny proportion of the total cost of the board's operations—£890 million in the year just past. The production of coal in 1966-67 amounted to 173 million tons, a decline of 5.3 per cent in the year. The labour force in British collieries continues, however, to decline even more quickly, which implies an increase of productivity amounting to 1.4 per cent in the year. The board says in its report that it was able financially to break even only because of an increase of output and of productivity towards the end of the year. At the beginning the rate of loss of miners from the industry was so great—amounting to 1,000 or so a week—that the efficient operation of the collieries was impeded.

The report will as always be scanned carefully for evidence of the directions in which British fuel policy is evolving. The National Coal Board seems now reconciled to a further decline in the scale of its operations under the combined pressures of competition from natural gas and nuclear power. The report, however, repeats the board's well known view that the exploitation of new sources of fuel should be "so regulated as to secure the greatest advantage to the economy as a whole, now and in the immediate future". It is particularly outspoken about the building of nuclear power stations. "Nuclear stations cost huge sums in capital, and account needs to be taken of the use to which the excess capital expenditure could be put if it were not sunk in these stations. To the extent that the basic technology remains unproved, the justification for spending these large sums of capital must be open to question. And if the second generation stations are but a step along the road to the development of the fast breeder reactor stations, it would seem to be logical to make this step no larger or more expensive than it needs to be. The mistake of an over-large experiment which was made in the first nuclear programme ought not to be repeated."

In practice, the National Coal Board seems to be doing well in its resistance to over-rapid contraction. Earlier this year it was agreed that coal production should amount to 155 million tons a year at the end of the decade—15 million tons more than the natural demand for coal estimated by the Ministry of Power. Since the publication of the annual report, the board has also announced a month long halt in the process of shutting down collieries as part of its strategy of concentrating production where coal can be won cheaply. Although this agreement between the board and the British Government is prompted by a wish to avoid or at least to restrain a further increase of

unemployment, the long-term result could well be still more coal in 1970. Much will depend on how resolutely the Government can hold to its cheap fuel policy.

New Faces on the Front Bench

THE changes in the British Government which Mr Wilson set in motion at the end of August now seem to have been completed. At the Department of Education and Science, the duties of the two Ministers of State have been decided; Mrs Shirley Williams will be responsible for the universities and the research councils, while Miss Alice Bacon will look after other problems, schools and teacher supply among them. There will be widespread interest in universities and research councils over Mrs Williams's appointment; although she has only been a member of parliament since 1964, a considerable reputation has preceded her to the department.

At the Ministry of Technology, an appointment has been made to replace Mr Edmund Dell, who was transferred to the Department of Economic Affairs as a Joint Under Secretary. Mr Gerald Fowler takes over Mr Dell's old job as Joint Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Technology. Mr Fowler has spent most of his career at the University of Oxford as a lecturer, but spent a year at the University of Lancaster before his election as MP for The Wrekin in 1966.

BA at Leeds

THE 129th meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science seems to have been a success. This year the association visited Leeds for the fourth time, and the meetings were held in the buildings of the University of Leeds. As usual the association was catholic in its choice of subjects, and the 3,200 delegates who turned up could listen to dissertations on subjects as diverse as the changing face of West Yorkshire, or the control of crime. In general it seemed that the specialized section meetings were more successful than the attempts to involve a larger public by symposia on subjects such as science policy or the reasons why children do not choose science as a career. The best discussion of the public role of scientists, for instance, was to be found in the section devoted to the sociology of science.

The BA is showing some talent in adjusting to reduced circumstances. Last year it made a small profit, apparently by cutting its coat to fit its cloth, after appeals to the Department of Education and Science for more money had gone unheard. Despite this, its organization, particularly at the grass roots, is ill defined to say the least of it, and even those involved find it hard to explain. The current financial squeeze for the BA, which everybody hopes will be only a temporary phenomenon, offers an opportunity for reorganization which the association would be unwise to miss.

Saudi Arabia and Telescopes

LAST week Dr Abdul-Aziz Khowaiter, the vice-rector of Riyadh University, Saudi Arabia, put forward a tentative proposal for the construction of an optical