# NEWS AND VIEWS

## Cuts at Culham

By deciding to reduce by half the expenditure on thermonuclear fusion research at Culham Laboratory, the Atomic Energy Authority has risked offending its friends without much pleasing its enemies. The work of the laboratory has been devoted to the production of a commercial reactor using thermonuclear fusion reactions, instead of the fission reactions used in current reactors. Although a committee set up by the authority is believed to have recommended that the laboratory be shut altogether, the authority finally decided that expenditure should be reduced by 10 per cent annually for five years, at the end of which time there should be a review of the situation. Although the problems of plasma containment are particularly elegant and interesting, nobody would deny that they are difficult in the extreme, and the axe has been hanging over Culham for several months.

The cost of the laboratory last year was about £4 million. It has been higher than this; in 1964–65 it cost £5 million to run. It is not a particularly old laboratory—construction did not begin until 1960. The staff of 800 includes 190 qualified people and a number of visitors from abroad on short or long term contracts. Although the great majority of the effort has been directed at controlling artificial plasmas, the laboratory has also allowed itself to be involved in the study of natural plasmas by space soundings. Recently it won the contract to supply the telescope for the ESRO astronomical satellite. Despite doubts about the satellite project, which will not get the final go-ahead for some months, there does not seem much room for economy in this side of the work. Since only a quarter of the budget this year is intended for capital expenditure, most of the cuts will have to be made on current expenditure, which is likely to mean reductions in staff. Despite this, the authority hopes that there will be no formal redundancies and that the staff can be reduced by natural wastage; there is also an unexplained optimism that the wastage will not be directed overseas.

At Culham itself the staff are naturally upset by the decision, although it was not unexpected. Much of the rancour is directed at the cloak of secrecy with which the AEA has surrounded the decision, and the fact that only two years after opening a laboratory which cost £6 million to build, the AEA can close half of it without even explaining publicly the reasons for the decision. Mr Benn's explanations in the House of Commons cut no ice at Culham, and his rejection of suggestions that the programme at Culham was inflated by the staff there have merely served to confirm the feeling that the authority alone is responsible for the mess. There is also doubt about what the half of the laboratory that will be left will be used for; above all the staff at Culham feel the need for something challenging to do. Unless the authority or the minister can produce ideas soon, the argument runs, the remarkable esprit de corps which has been a feature of Culham may be lost.

## New Broom for ESRO

It can be stated with confidence that the election of a theorician, Professor Hermann Bondi, as director-general of ESRO does not imply a decision to abandon experimental work. This would be to belittle both ESRO's power of survival and Professor Bondi's experience of the hardware of space research. Professor Bondi, 48 and a familiar figure in astronomy since he graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1940, is Professor of Mathematics at King's College, London. He was elected director-general at a meeting of the council of ESRO on July 27, and succeeds Professor Pierre Auger, who has been director-general since ESRO started. The appointment is for three years, and after an initial period when Professor Bondi will be arranging for his commitments at King's College to be taken over, he will be working full-time for ESRO.

ESRO has some tricky decisions to make during the next year—whether, for instance, to remain a coherent entity or to merge with ELDO. The ambitious astronomical satellite which ESRO hopes to launch still awaits final approval, although contracts have been provisionally placed, one with the Culham laboratory of the AEA. Professor Bondi is familiar with the mechanism of decision-making—he is chairman of the Astronomy Policy and Grants Committee of the SRC, and a member of the Astronomy, Space and Radio Board. He is also chairman of the British National Committee for Astronomy. ESRO is doubtless already bracing itself for the shock of his arrival—cynics have been heard to comment that whether or not Professor Bondi needs ESRO, ESRO certainly needs him.

## Effortless Progress

The Medical Research Council has survived another unruffled year, to judge by its annual report (HMSO, £1 6*s*. 6*d*.). Of all the research councils, the MRC is surely the most machine-like. This year even a new constitution, which provides for an increase in membership of the council from 12 to 16, and for the Secretary of State for Education and Science to take over the responsibilities of the Committee of Privy Council for Medical Research, has failed to put a spanner in the works.

For the past few years the MRC has been batting on a gentle wicket. Grants have been steadily rising at a rate of around 20 per cent per year (11 per cent in real terms, the council points out), and last year the council spent £11·8 million, more than double the figure for 1962–63. The council now supports no less than 77 units, the National Institute for Medical Research at Mill Hill, and research at universities and hospitals. Short term grants, though, are taking an increasing share of the budget—17 per cent, or £2·2 million this year.

The report for 1966–67 includes a 60 page section describing progress in some of the fields of research which the council supports. These well written and useful reviews include descriptions of the work which has shown that men with two Y chromosomes may be predisposed to crime. Although XYY males are very rare indeed in the population at large, a survey in a special security hospital has shown 9 such men in a sample of 315 (Jacobs *et al.*, *Nature*, **208**, 1351; 1965).

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