

Several developments have helped to interrupt the smooth attainment of the timetable spelled out a year ago by the council of Cern. For one thing, there has been the devaluation of sterling, which explains why the United Kingdom and Spain were not able, at the council meeting last week, even to approve the budgets for 1968—197·5 million Swiss francs for the basic costs of the Meyrin laboratory and 28·43 million Swiss francs for the programme connected with the Intersecting Storage Rings. The British Government is particularly concerned with the international consequences of devaluation, for something like £5 million a year out of the annual budget of £33 million of the Science Research Council is at present allocated to overseas expenditure. The question which has to be settled before it is possible for the Science Research Council to participate even in the ordinary activities of Cern is whether such a large and uncovenanted increase of real expenditure is possible without harming the rest of the council's work.

The 300 GeV project seems also to have been held up by doubts in West Germany about the desirability of the particular design worked out by the European Committee for Future Accelerators and published in July. Especially since details of the design of the United States 200 GeV accelerator at Weston, Illinois, have been made known in the past few months, there have been some suggestions that Europe might hope to obtain better value for money by building a somewhat simpler machine. The meeting of the Cern council last week seems to have reaffirmed the earlier view that a European machine should be generously provided with experimental facilities of all kinds, but at the same time it seems to have been acknowledged that the studies of the 300 GeV problem will be continued at Cern, so that the design already published must be regarded more as a feasibility study than as the detailed prospectus which it seemed to be a few months ago. To this end, the council last week did approve an allocation of \$4 million for the continuing programme of planning and design. Although it is theoretically possible that a final decision on the accelerator could be taken at any one of the four council meetings due to be held in the year ahead, the optimists who hope that everything will be settled by June are likely to be disappointed.

More about Stansted

LONDON'S third airport was discussed at Westminster again last week, this time in the Lords. Lord Macpherson of Drumochter initiated the debate, the first in the House of Lords on the subject since the White Paper was published in May with the decision to build at Stansted. In the eight hour debate only five of the thirty-one speakers supported the government's decision. The feeling among the rest was not that Stansted was necessarily the wrong site for the airport, but that public opinion had not been satisfied that the choice was the best. The facts behind the present situation were put forward—the Interdepartmental Committee report of 1963, calling for an inquiry; the inquiry inspector calling for a further review of the problem; the government review held in private coming out in favour of Stansted. Doubt about the decision to build arose because the final review was held in private, particularly as the reasons for this privacy were inconsistent. The White Paper stated

that the urgency of the problem precluded a public inquiry, which anyway would produce no additional facts. In the debate, however, Lord Kennet said, for the government, that the proper discussion of defence issues could not be carried out in public. Viscount Dilhorne submitted that because a considerable number of new facts had come to light since the original inquiry, it should be re-opened in public, in the manner recommended by the Franks Committee. Only in this way would "broad justice to those affected" be done and be seen to be done.

The White Paper suggested that a second pair of runways would be added to the two originally planned for Stansted. This proposal was not considered at the original inquiry, and would significantly alter effects on the area. Silverstone received a passing mention as an alternative, but most attention was focused on Foulness. Included in the cost of an airport at Foulness was £25 million (a much questioned figure) for moving the Shoeburyness firing range. Lord Beswick, putting the government's case, admitted he had "never treated this one very seriously". His main objection to the building of an airport on land reclaimed from the sea was based on the length of time it would take, quite apart from the time involved in holding a public inquiry. Lord Beswick believed the loss of food production from building an airport on good Stansted land, estimated at £1 million a year by Lord Butler, would be far outweighed by the foreign currency gained from a third airport built in the early seventies. If there was no such airport by 1977, on British Airports Authority estimates, nearly 3 million overseas visitors would have to be turned away, losing Britain an estimated £36 million in foreign currency from landing fees, spending money and airline earnings.

Lord Plowden described the White Paper as "full of statements presented as facts which the public are expected to accept". He remarked on the paucity of information on cost-benefit analysis. The social costs involved might be so heavy that the country could well afford the time to investigate the situation again. The theory that Whitehall is always right was questioned by Lord Balfour, who quoted as an example the speech he himself made as Minister of Aviation in 1939, which was full of miscalculation about airports.

The belief of the Lords was that there is still time to reconsider the Stansted decision. The most important product of the whole debate was the announcement by Lord Kennet that the government is intending to improve the planning laws for projects on the scale of airports. Under the present system planning permission is sought for one specific site only, but the proposed Town and Country Planning Bill would allow alternative sites to be listed in the request for planning permission. An inquiry would then determine which of the alternatives was most suitable before the present procedure is gone through.

Changing Units

A COMMITTEE appointed by the Ministry of Technology to investigate the adoption of metric units has reported that, unless steps are taken now, an important sector of the economy may be slow to accept the new units. The committee, formed by the CBI at the request of the Standing Joint Committee on Metrication, a