

Parliament in Britain

Defence Appointments

FIVE university appointments financed by the Ministry of Defence have so far been created. Mr G. W. Reynolds, Minister of Defence for Administration, said that arrangements had been made with Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Southampton Universities, King's College (London) and All Souls' College (Oxford) to appoint an additional member of staff to specialize in the defence aspects of his discipline. The ministry's grant is initially awarded for five years and will be reviewed at the end of this period. Responsibility for the appointment is the university's. The ministry encourages the publication of results unless classified information is involved. (Written answer, November 22.)

Influenza Vaccine

ASKED what resources the Government has to deal with the threatened spread of Hong Kong influenza to Britain by about Christmas, Mr D. Ennals, Minister of State in the Department of Health and Social Security, said that the vaccination was desirable for people suffering from chronic diseases like bronchitis, tuberculosis, heart and renal diseases and diabetes. The supply of A2 virus vaccine is not likely to meet

all possible demands for it. (Written answer, November 22.)

Mentally Handicapped Children

MEMBERS of the House welcomed the Prime Minister's statement that responsibility for the education of mentally handicapped children will be transferred from the health to the education service. No change is necessary in Scotland where the education authorities are already responsible. The Prime Minister said that the necessary legislation would be prepared as soon as possible. (Oral answer, November 26.)

Fuel Supplies

THE Economist Intelligence Unit's study of Britain's energy supplies, recommending that the production of coal should not decline as fast as the Fuel Policy White Paper suggested, has been studied by officials in the Ministry of Power. But Mr Mason, the Minister of Power, said that he did not accept its conclusions or that it invalidated the Government's White Paper. (Written answer, November 26.)

Hovertrain

TRACKED HOVERCRAFT LIMITED is to get an extra £1.5 million to produce an experimental manned vehicle on a track several miles long. Announcing this, Mr Mallalieu added that the question of fast transport to and from airports was seriously being considered. (Oral answer, November 27.)

New Constitution for British Physicists

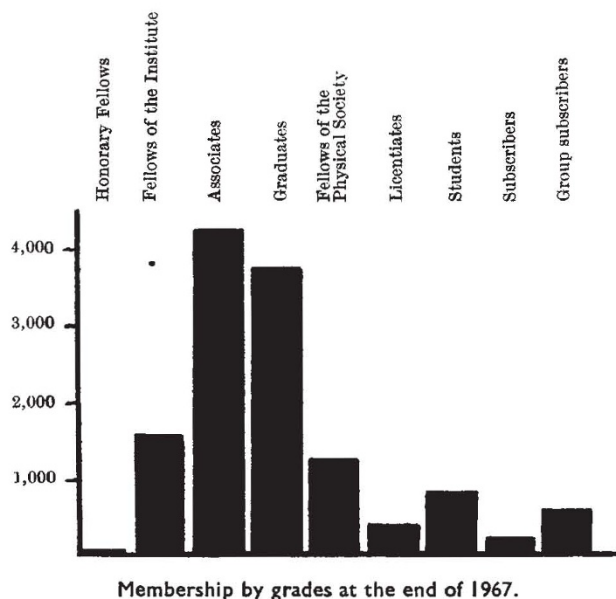
THE quaintly named organization which has been known as "The Institute of Physics and The Physical Society" for the past eight years may quite soon be called simply the Institute of Physics, and outsiders will no doubt welcome that simplification of a complicated world. The change of name, however, is only one of several proposals for change which constitute a package formally approved at an extraordinary general meeting held in London last week, on November 27. The new developments centre on a proposal by the council of the Institute of Physics and the Physical Society (referred to in what follows as the Organization) to apply to the Privy Council for a Royal Charter. The immediate effect of this would be to change the basis of incorporation of the Organization, which is at present registered as a limited company with the Board of Trade, but there is also strong feeling among many influential members that the role of the Organization as a learned society will in the process be emasculated. Some of this opposition bubbled to the surface of the general meeting, and was no doubt charged with some of the resentment among members of the Organization at the haste with which the meeting appears to have been called—the advance notice was only two days more than the statutory minimum.

The origin of the Organization is to be found in the late fifties, when there were powerful arguments in favour of the merger of the Physical Society, a learned society, and the Institute of Physics, a professional body concerned with the professional status of physicists and competent to award to its members professional qualifications similar to those awarded by the engineering institutions. Although the members (or

Fellows) of the Physical Society were mostly academics and the members (Graduates, Associates and Fellows) of the Institute were mostly at work in industry, the overlap between the two bodies was considerable—both of them, for example, were accustomed to organize scientific meetings which would necessarily appeal to members of both bodies. Discussions about an amalgamation of the society and the institute were well under way in 1959, when the presidents of the organizations were, respectively, Mr J. A. Ratcliffe and Sir George Thomson.

Although the amalgamation of the two bodies which was finally carried out early in 1960 made it possible for the Organization to begin with a much stronger executive arm, and although the council of the Organization brought together (as it still does) physicists with roots in the Physical Society and the Institute of Physics, the activities of the two organizations remained more or less parallel to each other. Fellows of the Physical Society remained Fellows of the Physical Society, while the grades of membership of the Institute of Physics, which implied professional status of a kind, also kept their separate identity. Only the non-voting student members were shared indistinguishably by the two amalgamated societies.

Those who now resent the proposals which go along with the application for a Royal Charter say that when the merger took place, there was a "gentleman's agreement" that this parallel coexistence would continue. One resentful member says that he has, for the past eight years, regarded the Organization as a federation, not an amalgamation. From this point of view, the most striking of the new proposals are those



which would require that present Fellows of the Physical Society will either have to become Fellows of the Institute of Physics or enter a kind of limbo in which they can continue to subscribe at the old rate and continue to enjoy the old privileges, but in which they cannot vote. There will be no further elections to the grade of Fellow of the Physical Society.

The new scheme of membership is much more hierarchical than that familiar in most learned societies. In future, there will be two kinds of voting members—Fellows and Members. Fellows will be expected to have an honours degree in physics or its equivalent and something between seven and ten years of experience after graduation in what is called “responsible work”. Members, by contrast, will be expected to have similar qualifications and between three and five years experience—Associates of the Institute of Physics will be transferred to this grade without any further fuss. The non-voting grades of membership will include Associate Member and Associate, the former grade including newly qualified graduates from university and the second including people with more experience (and who are more than 25).

It is understandable that such distinctions between members should go against the grain for those who have sought to regard the Organization as a learned society in the old-fashioned sense. The argument in favour of the distinctions is that the grades of membership in the old Institute of Physics were frequently regarded by those who held them and sometimes by their employers as professional qualifications. Associates (the future Members) might often be men in their thirties who had found their way into physics by means of diplomas obtained outside a university. By the same test, the old Graduateship would tend to strengthen the status conferred on a person by a Higher National Certificate or similar academic qualification. One of the ironies of the present discontent in the Organization is that some of the professional members of the old Institute of Physics resent the way in which Fellows of the Physical Society will have an automatic right to become Fellows of the new institute without

going through the procedures which other people have to go through.

Those who oppose the new arrangements say that what is proposed amounts to a breach of an implicit “moral” understanding within the Organization. This was one of the points to come up at the meeting on November 27. Among people working in the universities, there is a feeling that the advocates of the new arrangements have not made a convincing case for the hierarchical membership structure or even for the view that professional activities are appropriate, let alone feasible, in a field such as physics. One of the potentially dangerous features of the present discontent is that it may create a gulf between academic and industrial physicists.

In practice, however, even those who criticize the new proposals are quick to emphasize that the Organization has in the past eight years been able to accomplish many things beyond the reach of the constituent bodies. The way in which it has reorganized its publications commands respect, although there are many outsiders who regret that in the reorganization, titles such as the *Proceedings of the Physical Society* have been pushed into second place. The Organization has also taken a leading part, with good effect, in the organization of the European Physical Society. Among some members, however, there is a suspicion that the proliferation of sub-groups with specialized interests has tended to allow industrial interests to dominate scientific meetings. There is also a feeling that over-organization is responsible for the ever increasing charges for meetings. The registration fee for one day meetings is now as much as £1 10s for members and £4 for others.

But may not all these snags be insignificant compared with the advantages of a Royal Charter? This is a question to be answered. Unfortunately the Organization’s own explanation is not particularly helpful. A memorandum issued on November 1 says that the benefits of a Royal Charter would be “intangible but nevertheless real”. This move, the argument goes, would be a “proclamation of leadership in physics” and therefore an asset to the Organization in its international dealings. “A chartered body is regarded as a public body and, with the passage of time, tends to become more influential and powerful because of its special status”. More informally, as one architect of the proposals says, a Royal Charter “will give us more leverage in the corridors of power”.

How far is the die cast? At the meeting on November 27, it seems that the new President of the Organization, Dr M. R. Gavin, said that the council would no doubt consider at its meeting next week the objections raised at the meeting on November 27. At the same time, the Organization does seem to have general support for the application for a Royal Charter, which was first brought into the open in February this year, and which was approved at a representative meeting later in the year. The vote in favour of the proposals last week—consisting largely of proxy votes—was also overwhelmingly in favour of the change. There is, however, some evidence that the new arrangements will create anomalies which the council may wish to avoid, and it is always possible that it will seem to the council prudent to draw off some of the steam which has been generated by allowing more time for discussion within the organization.