

RESEARCH EXPENDITURE

Government More Bountiful

CHEERFUL if somewhat ambiguous prospects for research spending in the United Kingdom in the year ahead have been provided by the annual Vote on Account, presented to the House of Commons by the Chancellor of the Exchequer a week ago. The publication of this document, intended to bridge government financing operations from one financial year to the next, also entails the publication of skeletal estimates of expenditure for the coming year. From the information available, it looks as if the research councils will be treated at least as generously as they had been hoping and probably a good deal better than they had feared.

The expenditure of the research councils predictably continues to increase, and at comparatively generous rates. In the table, all the figures are given in 1969 prices.

	1968-69 (£ million)	1969-70 (£ million)	Increase per cent
Science Research Council	42.127	45.844	8.82
Medical Research Council	15.311	17.141	11.92
Agricultural Research Council	13.483	14.663	8.75
Natural Environment Research Council	9.193	11.725	27.5
Social Science Research Council	1.728	2.380	37.7

The Ministry of Technology budget shows a slight decline in the amount to be spent under the aerospace heading; this will fall from £233.5 million this year to £230.7 million next; at the same time, the industrial services of the ministry will show a very small increase between the total net estimate for this financial year of £31.9 million, and that for the next financial year, which amounts to £32.1 million. The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (the new name for the GPO) will be spending £135 million, against £97.5 million last year. The amount spent on universities and colleges shows a very small increase indeed. This year it is running at £245.6 million; next year the estimate is £246.5 million. The Department of Education and Science actually shows a decline in its budget, from £70.0 million to £69.5 million.

The museums seem to have done rather well. The British Museum (Natural History) will have its grants increased by a comparatively modest £30,000 to £1.1 million, but the British Museum proper, in spite of the row between the Government and the trustees last year, will have expenditure increased by some 12 per cent to £2.86 million. Even the Science Museum will have an extra 5 per cent to spend.

The British Government has managed to keep public spending more or less within the targets it set itself. Total expenditure for 1969-70 shows only a modest increase in real terms, which came as something of a relief to the foreign exchange markets, which had feared a repetition of last year's run on the pound after the publication of the Vote on Account. This year's, presented by the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week, was prefaced by an elaborate explanation intended to prevent anybody getting the wrong idea this time.

ELDO

Going it Alone?

THE four hard core countries in ELDO (European Launcher Development Organization) seem now to have decided to turn their backs on Britain's prevarications and may even complete the Europa launcher programme on their own. The countries involved are France, Germany, Belgium and Holland.

This came out after a high level meeting of the four in Brussels last week from which Britain was excluded. At a press conference later, the Belgian Science Research Minister (and an ex-Prime Minister), Monsieur Lefèvre, declared the intention of the four to complete the European rocket without Britain and Italy and announced the formation of "a club" to do so. The only doubt was the continuing availability of the booster stage, the British Blue Streak. This has already (mid-1968) been guaranteed "at cost" by Britain to the continentals on a basis of ELDO's continuation. A "club" may be another matter.

Though not likely to improve Britain's continental image, this turn of events should be nectar to Mr Benn. His policy has succeeded in getting Britain out of the costly launcher business, directly saved £17 million (£10 million due this year and £7 million due for 1970) and wrecked the launcher organization which Britain instigated.

NUCLEAR INDUSTRY

Grand Design Falters

THE unrest in the British nuclear power industry shows little sign of abating. Mr Wedgwood Benn's "grand design" called for the formation of two new nuclear companies, taking in expertise from the Atomic Energy Authority and cash from the Industrial Reorganization Corporation. These two companies were to have taken over reactor development from the authority. It has now emerged that neither of the two companies is willing to take on the commercial development of the steam generating heavy water reactor at Winfrith, on which the AEA has spent £16 million. It had been generally assumed that British Nuclear Design and Construction, having turned down the opportunity of taking over the fast reactor at Dounreay, would be willing to take on the SGHWR. This hope has now been disappointed. At the same time, the other company, the Nuclear Power Group, is to offer employment to only a minority of the staff at AEA Risley who have been working on the development of the fast reactor. Instead of transferring the full group of 330 people to TNPG, the transfer is now only expected to involve 150 people who work in the Reactor Design Office. The other 180 people, who work either in Central Technical Services or in the Engineering Group, will remain in the AEA, and it is almost certain that the Engineering Group will be broken up. "The grand reorganization of the nuclear industry", one Risley man commented bitterly, "has now dwindled to a transfer of 2 per cent of the authority's staff."

This change of plan is clearly going to have important implications for the development of the fast reactor. The most obvious is the difficulty of coordination which is bound to arise between the staff transferred to