

## Parliament in Britain

### Pollution

A PERMANENT Royal Commission is being set up to advise on all matters concerning environmental pollution. Announcing this in the House of Commons, the Prime Minister said that the commission would act as a watchdog on the problem of pollution, and it would ensure that the executive departments are brought into play as rapidly as possible to deal with questions which arise. The Secretary of State for Local Government and Regional Planning will be responsible for coordinating action on pollution, and, to assist him in this duty, a small group of scientists, mainly on the staff of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Planning, is being set up. This unit will deal with specific problems and help the minister to make sure that the correct resources are quickly deployed. Mr Wilson also announced that an advisory council is being established, on the same lines as the Clean Air Council, to deal with the problem of noise, and he said that legislation is being prepared to replace the existing voluntary control over the use of pesticides. The government, he said, would publish a White Paper next year to show how much has been done to control environmental pollution. (Statement, December 11.)

### L-Dopa

DR JOHN DUNWOODY, Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Services, said that the Committee on the Safety of Drugs has cleared the drug L-dopa for clinical trials organized by the Medical Research Council. Mr Peter Mills was concerned about the drug being prescribed on the National Health Service to sufferers from Parkinson's disease because of its alleged side effects, but Dr Dunwoody said that doctors are at liberty to prescribe whatever they consider appropriate. The committee has been unable, however, to assess the quality and safety of some preparations of L-dopa because pharmacological and toxicological data have not been available. (Written answers, December 8.)

### Teachers' Salaries

THE estimated expenditure on teachers' salaries in Great Britain during 1969-70 is £915 million. This represents about 40 per cent of the estimated total public expenditure of £2,300 on education this year, and school teachers account for £672 million of the salaries bill. Mr Edward Short, who had been asked for these figures by Mr John Cordle and Mr David Lane, said that they do not include salary increases effective from April 1 this year. (Written answers, December 9.)

### Computers

DR ERNEST DAVIES, Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Technology, said that government policy for purchasing computers is to buy British whenever possible. Price, he said, is only one of many factors taken into account, but machines made in Britain by subsidiaries of foreign firms are regarded as British in this context. In reply to a question from Mr Leslie Huckfield, Dr Davies said that the government has no plans at present for launching new schemes for financial assistance to computer hardware or software companies, but the investment grant scheme is kept under constant review. Where proposals are accepted, this is usually on a cost-sharing basis. (Written answers, December 9.)

## Miscellaneous Intelligence

THE *vie intérieure* of the medical profession is nowhere better illustrated than in the classified advertisement section of *Pulse* (astutely provided as a free service by a certain pharmaceutical company). Sphygmomanometers are exchanged and mated together with the usual middle-class *bric-à-brac* of tiger skins, lady's ski boots (size 5), whippet puppies, National Health Service filing cabinets and once worn silver ash wigs. But what would Hippocrates make of this charitable offer (*Pulse*, December 6): "Doctor will post his copy of the *British Medical Journal* to deserving applicant for 1s 6d weekly, please enclose s.a.e. for reply"?

THE rats are deserting one by one, leaving the ostriches alone on their cyclamate bandwagon. This week's strip from the cyclamate cartoon is that two Swiss chemical companies, CIBA and Sandoz, have resumed sales of the deadly sweetener which they dropped in September after Mr Cledwyn Hughes and others had climbed aboard Mr Finch's bandwagon. Toxicologists in the two companies have apparently proved to their satisfaction that "there was nothing to justify the belief that cyclamates are dangerous for human consumption" (*The Times*, December 15). The Swiss Federal Health Department has yet to declare its verdict on the pernicious dolceficients.

EVER since Professor J. Z. Young invented the giant squid axon, neurophysiologists have laboured under the dolorous necessity of sweating out the summer in places like Naples, where squid are plentiful. Indeed, during the winter months, entire research teams from the United States have been compelled to decamp to Chile and Peru where squid are in season. What good news it is that Mr Edward T. La Roe, a graduate student at the University of Miami, has now succeeded for the first time in raising squids from egg to adult in aquaria. How delighted neurophysiologists will be to have squid on tap at home.

NOT less than 0.6 per cent of fatal heart attacks occur during the act of procreation, according to a survey reported in that vigorous broadsheet, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory News. A similar survey was, of course, carried out some 400 years ago by Montaigne, who reported that there died "betwixt the very thighs of women, Cornelius Gallus, the praetor; Tigillinus, captain of the watch at Rome; Ludovico, son of Guido di Gonzago, Marquis of Mantua; and—or worse example—Speusittus, a Platonic philosopher, and one of the Popes". If the ORNL report neglected to cite its distinguished predecessor for fear of giving offence, there was no need to worry; the first woman in history officially to have slept a night in the Vatican was Princess Carlotta, wife of the Emperor Maximilian, but that is another story.

THE timber pine, *Pinus radiata*, takes 70 years to grow a bole three foot in diameter, but the King William pine takes 620 years to attain the same girth. Assuming that each sort of pine costs A\$13.3 a year to tend, and that interest rates remain constant at 5 per cent, the cost of growing a timber pine works out at A\$930 and that of the King William pine at A\$186 × 10<sup>12</sup>, Mr R. K. Bamber told the Linnean Society of New South Wales last month. "This suggests that, in economic terms, the King William pine is irreplaceable."