Parliament in Britain

Secondment of Civil Servants to Industry

FIFTEEN civil servants have been seconded to industry this year, and the government hopes to increase the scope for temporary interchange of staff between the civil service and other employment. No incentive is given to encourage civil servants to take temporary work in industry, but Mr Peter Shore, Minister without Portfolio, said that he is sure that many would be keen to take the opportunity without any particular incentive being supplied. Mr Tam Dalyell and Mr John Osborn had asked what proposals the government has for secondment of civil servants to industry, but Mr Shore refused to go into details. (Oral answers, December 15.)

Storage of Drugs

MR MERLIN REES, Under Secretary to the Home Office, said that the Home Secretary is preparing regulations under section 4 of the Dangerous Drugs Act about the storage of drugs in chemists' shops, and the Secretary of State for the Social Services is about to give further advice to hospitals. Mr Albert Booth had asked for steps to be taken to reduce the risk of addictive drugs being stolen from chemists' shops, hospitals and doctors' surgeries. (Oral answers, December 18.)

Upper Clyde Shipbuilders

THE maximum charge to public funds resulting from the undertakings given to the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders will be £7 million in loans and any payments arising from guarantees in the event of the company's insolvency. Guarantees will be restricted to orders which

are likely to be profitable and which will be completed quickly. Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn emphasized that the government does not intend to provide a permanent safety net for the company. (Written answers, December 16.)

Student Health in Polytechnics

MR FRANK JUDD asked the Secretary of State for Education and Science whether he will make a study of psychological stress, with particular reference to mental breakdown, suicide and drop-out rates, among students at polytechnics. Mr Gerry Fowler said, however, that no such study would be made by the Department of Education and Science. Student health services are provided in the polytechnics only for students under nineteen years of age, except in the area of the Inner London Education Authority, which has wider powers under a local act. (Written answers, December 16.)

Oral Contraceptives

MR DAVID ENNALS, Secretary of State for the Social Services, rejected a suggestion from Dr Summerskill that he should institute an inquiry into the adverse effects of oral contraception. The Dunlop Committee, he said, would issue a full report in about three months' time and the Medical Research Council, the Family Planning Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners are also doing a good deal of research into the effects of oral contraceptives. Asked by Mr Arthur Dean about the publicity given to the Dunlop Committee's early warning about high oestrogen contraceptives, Mr Ennals said that this had been the result of a press leak after a circular had been sent to manufacturers warning them of the committee's forthcoming recommendations. (Written answers, December 15.)

Slimming at the Institute of Cancer Research

by our Special Correspondent

THE Institute of Cancer Research now has a new director; in July Dr T. Symington, professor of pathology at Glasgow, will become director of the Institute of Cancer Research, including the Chester Beatty Research Institute, whose previous director, Sir Alexander Haddow, retired in March. It remains to be seen how far Professor Symington's task will be complicated by the manner in which seventeen members of the staff of the institute have recently been declared redundant.

The institute faces a budgeted deficit next year of nearly £100,000, assuming that the expected £200,000 accrues from legacies. Faced with the necessity of reducing costs, as well as the possibility that a new director would not be found for some time, the Committee of Management in January this year appointed a panel to make the necessary savings. The way in which the panel selected those to be made redundant has, however, opened up dissensions among the scientific staff of the institute, especially because it did not consult the Academic Board on the matters of scientific policy involved.

The panel, known as the Ad Hoc Priorities Committee, seems to have been chosen to include the senior

scientific staff at the institute who were aware of the financial problems. The committee consists of Professor J. W. Boag (chairman), Professor P. Alexander, Professor A. B. Foster, Professor P. E. Thompson Hancock, Professor L. F. Lamerton, Dr F. J. C. Roe and Professor D. W. Smithers (who is also chairman of the Academic Board).

The Academic Board, which has thirty members, including the professors and readers of the institute together with six elected members representing the rest of the staff, was not informed of the existence of the Ad Hoc Committee until March 4 this year.

It seems then to have been told that the committee's terms of reference were simply to perform the day-to-day administrative functions that would usually be the task of the director. In particular, the board was not told that the committee might make particular decisions about redundancies. The Academic Board expressed the hope on March 4 that its authority to advise on matters of scientific policy would not be usurped, and is said to have been reassured on this point.

On May 12 and 13 the branches of the Institute of Cancer Research in London and in Sutton were visited

at the invitation of the institute by a subcommittee appointed by the Medical Research Council. The MRC subcommittee included Dr J. A. B. Gray, the secretary of the MRC, and Professor T. Crawford, chairman of the scientific advisory committee of the British Empire Campaign for Cancer Research, organizations which last year provided £458,000 and £240,000 respectively of the institute's £800,000 current income. Professor Symington, the new director, was also a member of the visiting committee.

It seems to have been agreed at a meeting of the Academic Board in August that the only way in which redundancies could be made without loss of morale in the institute was within the framework of a positive plan such as would arouse the enthusiasm of the scientific staff who would be with the institute over the next five years. But before any plan could be drawn up, it would first be necessary to appoint a new director, to unify the institute on a single site, and to find ways of increasing its income.

Early in September, the report of the MRC subcommittee (see *Nature*, **224**, 531; 1969) became available and on September 22 the Committee of Management met to consider both the report and the comments prepared by the Ad Hoc Committee. At the meeting, the Committee of Management empowered the Ad Hoc Committee to consider "the termination of work which is no longer sufficiently relevant".

On October 28, the Ad Hoc Committee laid before the Academic Board a document in which it was proposed that about twenty unnamed scientists should be declared redundant. The board debated the redundancy plan and rejected it by a large majority. There then followed two more meetings of the Committee of Management and several of the Ad Hoc Committee which resulted in exactly the same proposals for redundancy being made and implemented, except that the period of notice for the staff concerned was extended from 6 to 12 months.

What are the reactions to the redundancies? The Ad Hoc Committee believes that it has made the best of a difficult and unpleasant job. It has taken tremendous care to assess the work of those involved, most of whom have good prospects of finding other

jobs. If the scythe has mown particularly heavily among the younger research workers, it must be remembered that under university regulations professors and readers cannot be deprived of their posts except in cases of insanity or "gross moral turpitude". The Ad Hoc Committee admits that the choice of those asked to leave was not made primarily in the light of the MRC subcommittee's report.

Many of the staff of the institute do not see the redundancies in quite the same light. First, they are not persuaded that the redundancies are necessary at all. Second, even if the redundancies are necessary, they should not have been decided on until the Academic Board had had the chance to debate in general terms the question of scientific policy.

Third, it is felt by some that the people asked to leave have been treated unjustly. Are the redundancies really the consequence of an assessment of the direction of the institute's progress? Or is there more to be said? The Ad Hoc Committee is plainly unable to spell out all the reasons, but uncertainty creates a sense of injustice. Naturally people cannot know at this stage how easy it will be to find new jobs.

Another matter of concern to some of the staff is that there is no obvious relation between the list of redundancies and the general recommendations made in the report of the MRC subcommittee. It is true that the report is of mixed authority, as would be expected, and the MRC subcommittee was not in any case concerned to recommend on individual cases. None the less, those on the draft list of redundancies, which is firmly believed to have been compiled before the MRC visit, might at least have been given the chance to present their work before the subcommittee. Did the Ad Hoc Committee, which helped to arrange the visit, wish to present only the best work to the subcommittee?

How has this state of affairs come about? Even if the Ad Hoc Committee has made the correct decisions, as it may well have done, it must share the blame with the Committee of Management for going behind the back of the Academic Board. The Committee of Management believes that it would not have been fair to lumber a new director with the odium of sacking people, but new directors, after all, are expected to bring new brooms.

There is also some anxiety about the management of the institute's deficit. It is inevitable that cancer research institutes should be dependent on funds from several sources, but since there would presumably be no question of staff being declared redundant were the institute in surplus, the management of money has become a central issue. The income has risen in the past seven years in a creditable manner. Disregarding the annual income from legacies of about £200,000—which in good years has been invested—the institute's total receipts on current account have risen from about £500,000 in 1962 to £800,000 for the last financial year, an increase of more than 50 per cent. During this period the grant from the MRC has climbed steadily from £280,000 to £458,000 and that from the British Empire Cancer Campaign for Research from £170,000 to £245,000. The puzzle is to know on what grounds the institute could have expected more funds than it already receives. Has it been playing Micawber, and have people suffered needlessly as a result?

(*Leading article*, p. 1243)

Report of the MRC Subcommittee

THE MRC Subcommittee visited the Chester Beatty Research Institute in London, in which some three-fifths of the staff of the Institute of Cancer Research are employed, on May 12 and the part of the institute based at Sutton on the following day. The subcommittee apparently concluded that the work undertaken at Sutton was generally of high quality but that much of the work presented during the first day of the visit was of indifferent quality, and that lack of strong direction had led to a dispersion of effort. The subcommittee seems to have suggested that some of the lines of research pursued at the Chester Beatty were unprofitable and could be curtailed.

The subcommittee is said to have admitted the difficulty of assessing the work of a large institute in a short time but to have felt confident in having formed a valid opinion of the institute as a whole.

This correspondent has an apology to make to the immunologists at the institute for whom, it was said, "the report (of the MRC subcommittee) had few words of comfort" (*Nature*, **224**, 531; 1969); it is now understood that the report in fact praises much of the immunological work of the institute.