

Parliament in Britain

Atomic Energy Bill

AMONG the legislation which failed to make the statute book before MPs left for their constituencies last week was the Atomic Energy Bill. The bill, which sought to remove the nuclear fuels business and the radio-isotopes business from under the wing of the Atomic Energy Authority and to set up separate companies to take care of these activities (see *Nature*, **225**, 1089; 1970), had already been amended and passed by the House of Lords, and was awaiting final approval from the House of Commons. The next government—whatever its political persuasion—must put the bill through the whole parliamentary process for a second time before it can become law.

Defence Contracts

MR JAMES DICKENS asked more questions about contracts for defence research agreed between the universities and the Ministry of Technology. Dr Ernest A. Davies, Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Technology, told him that the ministry's total expenditure on such contracts in the aerospace field in 1968–69 was £1,170,000. The University of Southampton was the biggest single contractor, with contracts worth just over £130,000, the University of London had contracts worth £121,000 and contracts placed at the University of Manchester were worth £111,000. The research involved has both civil and defence applications, Dr Davies said. (Written answers, May 26.)

Research and Development

RESEARCH and development was the subject of several questions from Miss Mervyn Pike. She was told by Mr Edward Short, Secretary of State for Education and Science, that the most recent figures show that in 1961–62, 2.67 per cent of the gross national product was spent on research and development. This had increased to 2.77 per cent in 1966–67 and dropped to 2.73 per cent in 1967–68. Mr Short also said that the total current expenditure on research and development carried out in government departments is estimated to be £229.6 million in 1968–69. This compares with £168.7 million in 1964–65. Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn, Minister of Technology, also told her that the net cost of running the Ministry of Technology's research establishments is about £21,700 per qualified scientist a year. This figure includes £12,000 in salaries for the scientist and his supporting staff, £6,900 for equipment and £2,800 for buildings. (Written answers, May 27 and May 28.)

Additional University Grants

SUPPLEMENTARY grants to universities, amounting to £20.703 million, were announced by Mr Edward Short in reply to a question from Mr Eddie Griffiths. They will cover the remainder of the quinquennium up to the first four months of the 1972–73 academic year, and are composed of a total of £16.818 million for recurrent expenditure and £3.885 million for capital expenditure. The chief reason for the extra grant is the recent increases in academic staff salaries, which are expected to cost about £8 million a year. (Written answer, May 28.)

Miscellaneous Intelligence

“DEVILS do not occur in cleared places, although they may be found in such areas if there are patches of scrub or high grasses, particularly if large populations inhabit the nearby bush. Devils live successfully in close contact with human settlement and activity, and field observations show that they are most numerous in coastal heath and sclerophyll forest. . . . Man is the principal predator of adult devils” (E. R. Guiler, *Australian Journal of Zoology*, **18**, 49, March 1970).

AFTER a slow start the opposing sides in the battle of the environment are warming up their rhetoric to what promises to be a long, hot summer. Last week the delegate of an American food manufacturing company was complaining to the Society of Chemical Industry in London that the people who want to see all additives banned from food—the organic gardeners, food faddists, and “ecology-minded hippies or econuts”—are often the same as those who would have marihuana made legal. The econuts also have the pesticide manufacturers running scared: “Our industry is frankly disturbed,” Mr W. P. Evans, deputy chairman of the British Agrochemicals Association, said recently, “by the present tendency on the part of those who make their own assessments of isolated and imperfectly understood work and promote their individual views to the alarm of the general public. A situation is created in which without any facts or real understanding of the issues, a public pressure for hasty judgment and precipitate action is built up.” Mr R. E. Ashworth, chairman of the same association, has also decided the time is right to don a martyr's clothing: “We cannot live in an environment where pesticides are a whipping boy and the cause to champion for every crank. . . . Semi-hysterical emotion is a pollutant that we cannot live with.” What sort of emotions can Mr Ashworth have had in mind? Perhaps those of sentiments like that which appeared in a recent editorial in the *Journal of the Soil Association* (**16**, 76; 1970): “Pollution and contamination are the Hitler of today”. Hitler versus the econuts: yes, there's no doubt about it, the atmosphere is being polluted.

LIKE those two simple variables on whose changing values couturiers make their fortunes, the hemline and the neckline, the estimates for Britain's population in the year 2000 plunge and rise wildly from year to year. Considering the frivolous way in which the government regards demography—in British universities the subject is chiefly supported by the Ford Foundation—it is not surprising that the government gets the kind of forecasts it deserves. In 1968, for example, it was fashionable to suppose, among the cognoscenti of the Registrar General's Office, that Britain's population of 54 million would add another 21 million to its numbers by the year 2000. Government planners who took any notice of this figure must have been badly caught out when the fashion veered last year to an increase of only 12 million between now and 2000. And last month Mr Crosland was telling a Commons committee that a figure of only 4 million is now the fancied increase for England and Wales (the increase for Britain as a whole, not yet released, is likely to be around 8 million). One thing is as plain as a pikestaff—any talk of a population policy is so much hot air until the government gets itself some decent crystal balls.