

SELECT COMMITTEES

Science and Technology Reprieved

MR WILLIAM WHITELAW, Leader of the House of Commons, seems to have had a slight change of heart during the Summer recess. Although his Green Paper on the select committees of the House of Commons (HMSO, 3s) which was published last week reflects many of the intentions he announced last July (see *Nature*, 227, 217; 1970), he has spared some of the specialist select committees—including the Select Committee on Science and Technology—at least for the present session.

Guided by a desire to reduce demands on members' time, while at the same time maintaining an effective machinery for scrutinizing the work of the executive, Mr Whitelaw has taken up many of the recommendations of the Select Committee on Procedure. The most important is that the Estimates Committee should be restyled into an Expenditure Committee with a membership of about 45. The new committee would "focus its attention on public expenditure rather than on the Supply Estimates and examine a wider selection of issues arising in this field".

Mr Whitelaw parts company with the Select Committee on Procedure in his proposals for the specialist select committees, however. The Green Paper suggests that the Select Committee on Nationalized Industry should be retained and that it should continue to have general oversight of the whole range of activities of the nationalized industries. Similarly, it is suggested that the Select Committee on Science and Technology should continue with its work. The Procedure Committee suggested that these committees should be scrapped, and that the proposed Expenditure Committee should take over some of their functions, but Mr Whitelaw believes that a dual system in which the three exist side by side would provide a more effective instrument for scrutinizing the work of public corporations. Also to be retained are the select committees on Race Relations and Immigration and on Scottish Affairs. But the Select Committee on Education and Science will not be reappointed; the evidence on teacher training which the committee took last session will be made available to the proposed Committee of Enquiry into the Training of Teachers.

The retention of the Select Committee on Science and Technology is something of a triumph for the pressure placed on Mr Whitelaw by some of his own backbenchers as well as by some of the opposition members of the committee. But what will happen to the enquiries on which it was engaged before the election is open to question. It seems likely, however, that the enquiry into the computer industry and into the British space research programme will be continued, while the investigation of the consequences of population growth in Britain may be scrapped or postponed.

The membership of the Select Committee on Science and Technology will also be somewhat different from that which sat before the election. Five members of the old committee failed to be re-elected last June, and the change of government means that the chairmanship of the committee will go to a Conservative member. Mr Airey Neave seems to be the most likely candidate, and Mr Arthur Palmer, chairman of the old committee, will probably be given the chairmanship of one of the subcommittees.

OIL STRIKES

Dividends from the North Sea

BRITISH PETROLEUM'S oil strike just inside the British sector of the North Sea confirms that the discovery last June of a large field in the Norwegian sector by the Philips consortium was not just an isolated freak. The strikes suggest that there is a wide distribution of oil under the North Sea. The BP strike lies about 100 miles north-west of the Philips Ekofisk field, along a line which passes through the Ekofisk field itself and several minor traces of oil found by BP and other groups. This places it in 350 feet of water (rather deeper than the Philips find) and more than 100 miles east of Aberdeen, so that many technical problems remain to be solved before Britain will feel the benefits of this discovery in terms of hard cash.

That the eventual fruits of this discovery will go in large measure to the government is beyond question—under the present taxation system, 12½ per cent of the well-head value of the oil is taken in tax, while a further 45 per cent of any eventual profits is subject to corporation tax. Moreover, 49 per cent of resulting dividends go to the government as the major shareholder in BP, and two of the blocks adjacent to BP's find are licensed by groups in which the National Coal Board is a chief partner.

In spite of the difficulties involved in bringing oil ashore compared with natural gas, the financial incentives are attractive. Oil will sell at commercial rates, whereas gas must be sold to the Gas Council, which has used its monopoly to keep the price for North Sea gas down to 2·87 pence per therm. BP is also already trying out the underwater construction of wells and has formed a partnership with Westinghouse Electric and the French groups CFP and Group Deep to design equipment suitable for oil production in deep waters.

The problem of financing a pipeline remains, however, and although BP claims that the cost should be about £25 million (equivalent to two new supertankers) this is almost certainly overoptimistic. But there will undoubtedly be other groups interested in forming a partnership comparable with the BP/Sohio deal which is providing the capital for the development of BP's Alaskan wells. There is also the possibility that the company could sell some of its Middle East interests. It seems likely that North Sea oil can be brought ashore for about two dollars a barrel, making it highly competitive with Middle East and African supplies.

Earlier claims that North Sea oil might eventually provide most of Europe's requirements seem to have been rather extravagant. The new BP field will do well simply to keep pace with domestic requirements, which are increasing by nearly 6 per cent a year. The oil could start coming ashore in commercial quantities in 1972, when it should provide about 10 per cent of Britain's requirements.

OIL POLLUTION

Inglorious Pacific Glory

THE precarious position of the tanker Pacific Glory on a shingle bank off the southern tip of the Isle of Wight raises once again the spectre of the Torrey Canyon and a country ill equipped to deal with widespread pollution. But fortunately a cogent series of emer-