and its ways, will be less sanguine; but in any case the most serious loss in the trappist course which the Agricultural Research Council has chosen is that an important episode in the development of public policy on research in Britain will be settled in such a way that nothing will be learned from it.

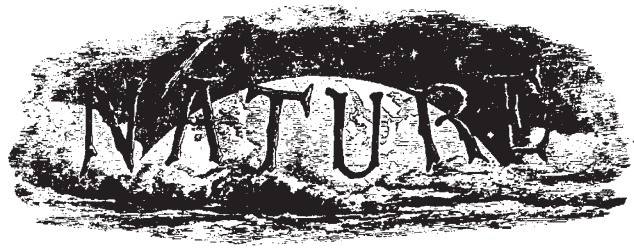
Where Next with Coal?

It seems that the British government has set its mind on the replacement of Lord Robens as chairman of the National Coal Board. His term runs out at the end of January and for several months it has been an awkward truth that his successor had not been named, and now he has announced that he will not carry on (as, without question, he would have liked). It is true that it may take the government several months to find somebody to succeed him, but the chances are that before the end of the year he will have paid the price of having interpreted too literally the doctrine that nationalized industries are autonomous organizations that function best when they imitate as closely as possible the methods and the objectives of commercial industry. In the past few weeks, Lord Robens has been protesting that he would not willingly part with those parts of the National Coal Board's empire that consist of hotels, chemical industries and enterprises for exploration for gas and petroleum in the North Sea. Undoubtedly, this impending conflict between the new government and the old chairman of the coal board has been a reminder to many people that Lord Robens can be an awkward customer. As it happens, however, he has also done a good job at the National Coal Board (which is more than can be said of Lord Hall, until recently the chairman of the Post Office Corporation).

It is therefore of some value to recite those parts of Lord Robens's public posture which may be lost when he finally departs. First, he has been a constant critic of the way in which decisions on new capital equipment have recently been made by the Central Electricity Generating Board. Some days before Christmas he was complaining of the folly of having based much of the capital investment programme on large steam turbines none of which had been tested when the orders were first placed. Those chickens have indeed come home to roost, for the CEGB now finds itself without a large part of its theoretically installed generating capacity, while the manufacturers of heavy electrical equipment in Britain find themselves less able to sell plant abroad than they might reasonably expect to be. Much the same has been true of the nuclear power programme. The leaps ahead from one drawing board to another have been too big for safety, with the result that a great deal of money is now tied up in equipment that does not function properly. To be sure, much of the difficulty has been that the British nuclear power industry had not been able to support careful research and development on the proceeds of a flourishing market for nuclear reactors as in the United States, but that of course should have been an argument for caution, not for the rapid evolution of design. Lord Robens does deserve the credit for having made this case at an early stage, but its effect could well have been more noticeable if he had been able somehow to make it more persuasively.

Another of his arguments in recent years has been that fuel policy in Britain should be determined neither by the government (which means the civil service) nor by the nationalized industries for coal, electricity and gas acting independently of each other, but by a fuel commission organized in such a way as to give advice to governments which can only be rejected at great risk. Shorn of some of the exaggerated and naive trappings of government by rational and like-minded oligarchs to which Lord Robens lent his name some years ago, this is a sensible idea that deserves to be examined seriously. For the difficulty in deciding what fuel policies to pursue is that governments are necessarily preoccupied with much more immediate considerations than can be appropriate within the industry. The time taken to build a nuclear power station is, after all, far longer than the constitutional duration of a single British parliament. Some of the alarming consequences of this have been apparent in the way in which British governments have intervened in decisions about the kinds of fuel to be used in particular power stations when they have feared trouble from interested parties, usually local colliers. A fuel commission could prevent a great deal of trouble of this kind but, more positively, it could create the kind of framework within which much more accurate account could be taken than at present of some of the important but indirect costs of the development of all fuel industry—such things as the cost of capital, the cost of providing an assured supply come cold or warm and the cost of keeping the environment decent. Even when Lord Robens goes, there is everything to be said for giving his fuel commission a chance to prove itself.

100 Years Ago



NOTES

Owing to Mr. Lockyer having been summoned to Malta to give evidence at the court-martial on the commander of the unfortunate *Psyche* (which we regret to hear has not been saved), we are unable to give a detailed report of the proceedings of the Sicilian Eclipse Expedition. We understand that Mr. Brothers, who was stationed at Syracuse, obtained five photographs of the Eclipse during totality. One of these shows the corona "as it was never seen on glass before." At Augusta very little was seen; but at Syracuse, the southernmost station of all, the clouds which concealed the earlier stages of the Eclipse, passed away from the sun about five minutes before totality, "disclosing," writes Mr. Brothers, "a scene I shall never forget." Next week we shall hope to be able to give a complete account of the results of the Expedition, and their bearings on any increase of our knowledge of Solar Physics.

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