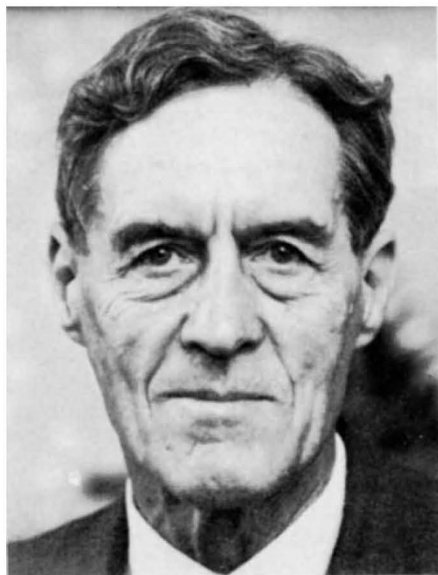


million people—indeed, he could see no way in which the predicted increase during the next 30 years could be curtailed—and population policies should be aimed at securing a stable population by about half way through the next century. As a start to achieving a stable population in the world, Lord Blackett suggested that Britain should seriously consider the consequences of adopting a population policy.



Lord Blackett: "Cheerfulness keeps breaking in."

Other speakers in the debate also toyed with the idea of instituting a population policy in Britain, and this has also occupied the Select Committee on Science and Technology during the past session. But the chief problem still remains how to influence the population of the developing countries. As Lord Blackett suggested, much more thought and research into the problem are needed, but in the meantime an announcement by Baroness Tweedsmuir of Belhelvie that the government is increasing its contribution to overseas aid, to the IPPF and other agencies concerned with population studies, is welcome news indeed.

TECHNOLOGICAL FORECASTING

What Went Wrong?

THE financial floundering of Rolls-Royce and the huge cost escalations of the Concorde project are the product of essentially the same shortcoming—a grave underestimate of the costs of new technology. The Social Science Research Council has therefore acted with a fine sense of timing in announcing that it is to give a grant of £75,000 to the Science Policy Research Unit of the University of Sussex for research into forecasting techniques. The research will be essentially a series of case studies of technological projects which have greatly exceeded their cost forecasts.

The research group involved in the study will be a mixture of social scientists and natural scientists, and the ultimate goal will be to produce a forecasting tool which eliminates the almost inevitable bias towards underestimating costs that is evident in much technological forecasting. The first step will be to determine what has caused this underestimation, and this will involve separating the deliberate bias from the accidental bias. The SSRU believes, for example, that underestimation of costs may be due in part to "a fundamental conflict of interest between scientists and engineers on the one hand, and managers and accountants on the other"—engineers may deliberately underestimate the difficulties in order to get a project accepted by the board of directors.

Having separated the deliberate from the accidental bias, the Science Policy Research Unit intends to use the findings to develop a technique for technology assessment which also includes provision for social effects of new technology. This involves an analysis of the effect on social attitudes of the failure of technology to live up to the promises that are made on its behalf by the forecasters.

CHEMICALS

BP in Trouble too

INFLATION seems to be overtaking the chemical companies one by one. Less than a month ago Shell Chemicals announced a "reappraisal" of its huge expansion at Carrington and Stanlow (see *Nature*, 229, 291; 1971) and now BP Chemicals International has announced the cancellation of a benzene project at Grangemouth which was to have cost more than £1 million, and the rephasing of the construction of a chemical plant at Baglan Bay, South Wales.

Most of the plans for the Baglan Bay project were completed at the end of 1968 but the total cost has now escalated by about 20 per cent to £100 million. It seems, however, that only one or two of the later plants within the complex will be affected. BP Chemicals is planning a purge on operating costs to try to combat the effects of inflation and the inevitable targets are the wages and salaries bill, and research and development. The company believes, however, that it will be able to streamline its research and development effort so that it will cost less but produce the same results.

At the end of last year, the parent company, British Petroleum, was obliged to arrange short term credit amounting to about £100 million because of difficulties in the tanker charter market; this fact and the last set of quarterly results only serve to emphasize the difficult period which BP and the rest of the chemical industry are going through.

CANCER RESEARCH

ICRF Expands

THE Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF) last week announced the establishment of two more research units, a medical oncology unit which will be accommodated at St Bartholomew's Hospital, and a tumour immunology unit, eventually to be housed in new buildings at University College, London. It seems likely that research in the new units will begin in October this year.

The establishment of these extra-mural units is a clear departure from the Fund's previous research policy; in the past, the ICRF has supported research into cancer chiefly through work carried out in the Fund's own laboratories at Lincoln's Inn Fields and at Mill Hill. As the demand for space at these sites has intensified, however, it has become necessary to find other ways of housing specialized and important research projects. The first indication of this fresh approach was the establishment of the breast cancer research unit at the New Cross Hospital in 1969. The new units, however, are evidence not only of expansion in terms of space, but also in terms of cooperative research.

St Bartholomew's Hospital will provide accommodation and hospital facilities for the medical oncology unit, but the ICRF will pay the running costs, which have been estimated at £250,000 over five years. An important feature of this unit will be the connexion which can be established through the director, Dr G. Hamilton Fairley, between the unit and the Chester Beatty Research Institute, where Dr Hamilton Fairley will continue his research on a part-time basis. The eventual scheme is for links to be forged between the ICRF, the Chester Beatty, St Bartholomew's Hospital and a large regional hospital. Such cooperation should lead to unique opportunities for clinical cancer research. Dr Hamilton Fairley regards the unit as the clinical arm of the ICRF; he is particularly anxious that the plan should make it possible for cancer patients to be treated at the unit before they have received any other treatment which could complicate their symptoms.

The ICRF is providing about £82,000 to cover the cost of building and fitting out the tumour immunology unit at University College, and a further £300,000 will be found over five years to pay the running costs. The total financial commitment for the first five years that the two units will be in existence is therefore just over £0.5 millions. Finance will be provided chiefly from the ICRF's annual income, but there is a substantial reserve fund available to cover inflation.

The tumour immunology unit will be run by Professor N. A. Mitchison, and recruitment of research staff has already begun.