

OLD WORLD

SELECT COMMITTEE

Worries about Research

THE Select Committee on Science and Technology heard evidence on the research councils this week from the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. The committee was clearly anxious to find out to what extent the research council system was to be modified but it was largely unsuccessful because of Mrs Thatcher's unwillingness to make any policy statement in advance of the report of the committee of the Council for Scientific Policy under Sir Frederick Dainton on the future of the research councils, which is expected in June.

Mrs Thatcher emphasized the role of the research councils—to "retain an adequate research capacity in all scientific disciplines" and to support fundamental research in such a way that specific research projects and scientists of great promise could be encouraged. It would always be the responsibility of her department, she said, to see that this research capacity was maintained.

Members of the committee were, however, anxious about the reasons for Sir Frederick Dainton's review of the research councils after only about six years of operation but Mrs Thatcher said that the review had been principally occasioned by a strong suggestion from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that it should take over the responsibilities of the Agricultural Research Council. Such a change could not be made without having a fundamental effect on the other research councils and possibly encouraging other government departments to try to obtain similar control of civil research. If this happened the objective of maintaining an adequate national research capacity would be severely jeopardized and it is therefore vital to look at and update if necessary the research councils and their fields of responsibility.

Sir Harry Legge-Bourke probably expressed the uncertainties felt by the committee and the councils in the clearest terms. Was the Secretary of State fully aware of the way the research councils felt? Mrs Thatcher suggested that there was always concern when an inquiry of this sort was going on but that the research council system should be seen responding to present day requirements—for example, the need for the proper organization of pollution research which cuts across the boundaries of most of the research councils.

On finance, Mrs Thatcher assured the committee that the research councils (which spend about £100 million per

year between them) could continue to rely on the government for support provided that no recommendations are made which would alter the whole structure of the research councils. But if for any reason there were further large cuts in the money devoted to civil research, she said, then the research councils would have to be scrutinized carefully to find out to what extent their work is relevant to "retaining a fundamental research capacity". The Secretary of State agreed with some members of the committee that one solution was to hive off the development work carried on by, for example, the Agricultural Research Council, to the appropriate government department.

During a brief discussion of the work of the Science Research Council, the committee asked Mrs Thatcher whether she thought there was a danger of over concentration if the council continued its policy of selectivity and concentration in the choice of projects. The Secretary of State pointed out that the mounting expense of equipment for scientific research made it absolutely essential that a policy of this type should be adopted but that it was always difficult to make sure that an appropriate balance was maintained.

The committee also brought up the idea that a single minister should be responsible for at least the collection of data on the whole government research effort. In this way, it felt, it would be easier to assess the effectiveness of the whole national research and development endeavour—of which the research councils represent only about 10 per cent—and make coherent plans for the future.

CAFD

Tiger with Paper Teeth

THE Council for Academic Freedom and Democracy (CAFD) made public earlier this week the findings of its most recent commission of inquiry (*Craigie College of Education*, available from the National Council for Civil Liberties, 15p). The report of the commission, which deals with the case of a lecturer whose contract was not renewed, has harsh things to say about the principal of the college and the Board of Governors.

The report of the Craigie affair calls for the Scottish Department of Education to set up an independent Court of Inquiry to examine the whole sorry business—on the face of things a very reasonable proposition but one which seems unlikely to be implemented. A spokesman for the SDE said last week that the department had received a copy of the report, but as the responsibility for hiring and firing lecturers lies

with the college governors, the initiative for such would have to come from that quarter.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of this particular case, the Craigie affair calls into question the activities of such groups as CAFD. Although nobody can seriously doubt that the group, under the able chairmanship of Professor John Griffith of the London School of Economics, is acting from the very highest of motives, any such organization must risk being accused of arrogating to itself the role of judge and jury. This is certainly true of Craigie where, unless some sort of tribunal is set up, the principal and governors must appear to have been convicted without trial and without recourse to further judgment. Indeed, the administration at Craigie is critical of the CAFD report, but it is not yet clear if it will get the chance to ventilate its complaints.

What, then, can be said to justify the CAFD's existence? In the first place, mounting an inquiry and publishing the results are weapons used only as last resorts where all other means have failed. Since the council was established in October 1970, more than 40 applications for help have been considered, but in only four cases have commissions of inquiry been mounted. Three reports have been published, and one, the Atkinson case, is still under consideration. In all the other cases, some kind of equitable settlement has been arranged either by direct negotiations or by interceding with the unions concerned.

What effects have the published inquiries had? The case of Anthony Arblaster is particularly contentious, for the CAFD report stimulated the Association of University Teachers (AUT) to promote its own inquiry, the results of which suggested that all was well and that there was no cause for anxiety. The local CAFD group has now produced another document listing alleged errors and omissions in the AUT inquiry. In spite of this controversy, Manchester set up a Senate committee which has now proposed an entirely new structure for the appointments committee in which professorial staff no longer predominate. Arblaster, denied a post at Manchester on allegedly political grounds, is now employed at Sheffield.

The *Bolton Sackings* (see *Nature*, 230, 420; 1971), the second published inquiry, has had equally fundamental consequences, although the results have been less overt. The commission decided that Bolton Institute of Technology was attempting to provide higher education on the cheap to the detriment of existing and projected courses. It seems likely that some of the embryo degree-level courses may now be