

OLD WORLD

SELECT COMMITTEE

Means to an End

THE House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology this week heard the Department of Trade and Industry give an account of itself. Mr David Price, Parliamentary Under-secretary and a former member of the select committee, described a department looking critically at most aspects of its services to British industry and technology.

Much of the interrogation was, inevitably, directed to Concorde and nuclear reactor development, which together took more than 58 per cent of the department's funds in 1970-71. The Concorde project cost £67.6 million, and although most of the developmental work has been completed, Mr Price explained that tooling costs are rising, and for some years ahead there will be airworthiness tests to be paid for as well as stress and fatigue tests.

Will worthy aerospace projects be endangered if Concorde accounts for 68 per cent of the department's aerospace budget in 1970-71? Mr Price shrugged off this suggestion from Dr Tom Stuttaford. He implied that funds will be available for projects that show themselves to be worthy of support. Last year, civil aero-engine projects other than Concorde (including the Trident 3B and the RB211) were supported to the tune of £7.4 million and the civil share of Ministry of Defence aviation research claimed £15.6 million.

Internal policy reviews at present incomplete allowed Mr Price to avoid laying down a firm line on nuclear reactor development finance, but he let it be known that the government has no intention of letting research in reactor development go to private industry. There was a case, however, for

a greater proportion of the cost of exploitation to be borne by industry or by the Central Electricity Generating Board. In 1970-71, £34.0 million was spent on reactor development, the lion's share (£22.7 million) going to research on the fast breeder reactor.

These major items of expenditure apart, the committee was chiefly interested in how the new department is forming policy. Does, in fact, the flame for reform and innovation which led to Mr Wedgwood Benn's green paper still burn bright? Mr Price emphasized his functional approach to research and development, saying that internal reviews are being conducted in this light. He was adamant that there is no room in the budget for research without prospect of industrial application. There is a clear need that research organizations should be closely associated with the ministry which they can best serve, and an early indication of this pragmatic approach was the transfer of four former Mintech research units, the Fire Research Station, the Forest Products Research Laboratory, the Hydraulics Research Station and the Water Pollution Research Laboratory, to the Department of the Environment. When the internal reviews are completed, said Mr Price, it may be found necessary to make changes in the administration of other units.

Research in the department's own establishments cost £12.9 million in 1970-71. These establishments include the National Physical Laboratory (£6.5 million), the National Engineering Laboratory (£2.9 million), the Warren Spring Laboratory (£1.2 million) and the Torrey Research Station (£0.5 million). Dr I. Maddock, controller of Industrial Technology, answering on behalf of the DTI, agreed that the directors of the various research institutes should and did have a degree of latitude in the research their organizations pursued, but that overall control rested with the department.

But if the department's own research organizations are favoured, it is perfectly clear that the industrial research associations are very much the poor relation. Limited to sharing out only £4 million annually, in 1970-71 they were awarded only £3.25 million and there is every indication that things will get tougher. The memorandum submitted by Mr Price to the committee states that "the terms on which grants are made are being stiffened whenever they come up for renewal, and the department is reviewing its policies for the RAs with the object of establishing priorities and determining which of them justify continued public support".

Clearly, the one hope of survival for the associations is contract research, but what future for them is there in this area? In industrial recessions, many

firms make economies by farming out their research work, and the contract research firms then profit. The boom in contract research has been under way for over ten years now, but even so the Fulmer Research Institute increased its turnover last year by 20 per cent to £360,000. The Huntingdon Research Centre showed a rise in turnover of about 30 per cent, much of its business coming from America or the continent. In contrast, the British Coal Utilization Research Association will be wound up later this summer as the Coal Board withdraws its support. Likewise, the British Non-Ferrous Metals Research Association reports an operating deficit for 1970 of £36,618, and to balance its budget the association has been forced to raise subscription fees by 25 per cent. The secret of success in contract research, amply demonstrated by the Fulmer unit, seems to be diversity of research facility, and freedom from the obligation to serve the needs of any one industry—especially a nationalized industry.

Unless the weakly RAs adopt such an approach they will surely succumb, for it seems certain that whatever policy changes are contemplated by the DTI on completing its internal reviews, succour for non-profit-making research will not be among them.

ACCELERATORS

Towards the Attainable

from our Soviet Correspondent

PARTICLES with energies of 2 GeV have now been obtained on the new colliding beam electron-positron accelerator of the Novosibirsk Institute of Nuclear Physics of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. The device is similar in type to that at Frascati, but the energies obtained at Novosibirsk are already almost twice as great as those obtained with the Italian machine. They are four times higher than those so far achieved in French experiments. The Novosibirsk accelerator is designed to operate at 3.5 GeV, and it is expected that this energy level will actually be attained by the end of this year. The Novosibirsk research team says that at 2 GeV, it is possible to generate all known elementary particles and their anti-particles. When the accelerator is operating at the intended energy level, the planners say they hope to identify and study previously unknown particles.

UK Research and Development Expenditure (£ million) 1970-71

Department of Trade and Industry

Civil AEA	48.0
Civil aerospace	99.0
Research establishments	13.0
Other	14.0

Other Government Departments

Research councils and universities	97.0
Defence	228.0
Other governmental R&D	43.0

Non-governmental R&D

Public corporations	46.0
Private industry	383.0
Overseas finance	30.0