

OLD WORLD

SELECT COMMITTEE

Cash for Computers

THE establishment of a computer purchasing board is recommended to resolve the involved and intricate process by which the British government buys computers. In a report published yesterday the Select Committee on Science and Technology calls for an end to the present system that involves collaboration with several departments before an order is finally placed by the Stationery Office and it recommends that the purchasing board be directly responsible to parliament through the Civil Service Department (*The Prospects for the United Kingdom Computer Industry in the 1970s*, HMSO, £0.47).

A further recommendation is that the government maintains its present policy of giving preference to the British computer industry as it has done to ICL but that the system should be based differently to that operated at present. In particular, more government aid should be given in the form of grants and development contracts—and less at the tendering stage. This latter system has aroused a great deal of furore in past years, with IBM and Honeywell complaining that even though they contribute to the balance of payments in Britain they are unfairly discriminated against, claiming that they have to tender 25 per cent lower than their British competitors to land a contract (see *Nature*, **230**, 4; 1971).

To implement a policy of government support for the computer industry the committee recommends the establishment of a computer research and development board through which all government support for the computer industry will be channelled. The board will have to decide on the amount of support to be given to companies and in a proposed set of criteria companies whose parent bodies are outside Britain can qualify for support. In awarding contracts, however, the committee recommends that price and performance should be the prime consideration and that in some instances these should have overriding priority. These suggestions should go a long way towards mollifying companies such as IBM and Honeywell and should ensure that ICL will continue to be a viable entity.

The committee comes out strongly for an independent British computer industry and it says that the industry should not become dominated by foreign technology. To ensure this the committee says that a considerable research and development effort is required to the tune of at least £50 million a year supplied by the government. It considered that apart from the £13.5 million

that the government had already injected into ICL the support of the industry has been "derisory". The committee also pointed out that the original purpose of this grant was to improve the research and development facilities of the company but in fact it had gone to improve the financial resources of ICL after the merger of ICT, English Electric Computers and the computing interests of Plessey. There is at present no assurances that further aid will be given to the industry—which has amounted to only £3.2 million in six years—and the committee is concerned that even the present level of support could be cut.

The report comes out strongly in favour of government departments making use of independent software houses. The committee argues that the use of independent companies to supply computer programs and services will make for efficient use of government computers as well as strengthening the computer industry in Britain.

GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

Significant Statistics

MORE first degree graduates of British universities took up further academic study or research in the pure sciences in 1969–70 than in 1968–69 but the number of men embarking on applied science research was smaller than in the previous year (*First Employment of University Graduates, 1969–70*, University Grants Committee, HMSO, £0.68).

The increase in the proportion of pure science graduates entering research during 1969–70—from 28.7 to 29.4 per cent for men and from 14.8 to 15.3 per cent for women—contrasts with a reduction in the percentage of all graduates entering research or further study which has been evident since 1964–65. Then, of the 27,549 first graduates of British universities, 5,682 students continued with further study whereas in 1969–70, 7,149 out of 47,584 graduates remained at university. Since 1966–67 the number of students entering research or academic study has remained substantially constant at a time when the total number of graduates has increased by more than 11,000.

The percentage of male applied scientists starting on research work decreased from 14.4 per cent in 1969 to 12.7 per cent in 1970, whereas the proportion of women graduates in applied science who started research increased slightly in the same period. The number of applied science graduates increased to 19.0 per cent in contrast to the number of graduates in pure science, which continued to drop—in 1969–70, 29.1 per cent of all degrees were granted in pure science compared with 30.1 per cent in 1968–69.

More than eleven thousand students

graduated with higher degrees in 1969–70 of which 64.6 per cent were in the sciences. Of the British students who obtained higher science degrees more than 22 per cent went into industry and 13.3 per cent went overseas. By contrast, only 7.9 per cent of arts higher degree graduates sought their first employment abroad.

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Professionals' Plans

PLANS are firmly afoot to found a Confederation of Professional and Executive Associations. The confederation is essentially the brainchild of UKAPE, the United Kingdom Association of Professional Engineers, whose general secretary, Mr Kenneth Peplow, said last week that he hoped to see CPEA fully active by January 1, 1972. The aim of the confederation will be to provide the machinery for professional bodies to express their viewpoint on matters which affect them. Mr Peplow says that he has received about 90 enquiries from various bodies—not all of them professional associations—but that the founding members of CPEA will be UKAPE, the Association of Supervisory and Executive Engineers and the scarcely formed Association of Professional Scientists and Technologists (see *Nature*, **233**, 440; 1971).

Mr D. B. Sweaney, general secretary of the ASEE, said this week that the confederation would be a non-militant and non-political body with which employers could deal in wage negotiations and other matters as the member associations would give the confederation full negotiating rights on their behalf. One qualification for the confederation is that the associations must have a professional code of conduct and ethics, and it is this the sponsors feel that demarks associations from other trade unions. UKAPE and ASEE are fully in favour of the scheme, although Mr Barry Henman at APST was more cautious. APST has only been a corporate body for a few weeks and its initial recruiting drive is being launched this month, so that while APST "values a common front [with other professional associations] the decision to join must be decided by the governing body of APST and this has not yet been done". APST holds basically similar aims to UKAPE and its organization has no doubt been accelerated by the realization among scientists that once the new Industrial Relations Act comes into force scientists in industry will definitely be on the employees' side of the fence when it comes to wage bargaining.

The plans for the confederation are ambitious—Mr Peplow hopes it will come to include all professional associations—but the strength of the three