

OLD WORLD

Medical Research Council on the Rack

THE Medical Research Council walked into a minefield last week when it chose to expose a fallacy in Lord Rothschild's now infamous table 4. In giving evidence before the Select Committee on Science and Technology the council pointed out that the sum ascribed to research into ageing — £9,000 — only represented a fraction of the actual amount that the MRC spent on problems of old age. Dr A. F. Lever, Director of the Blood Pressure Unit in Glasgow, said that responses to letters that he had sent to directors of MRC institutes the previous week showed, with several replies still to come, that more than £100,000 a year was being spent on this problem.

The Select Committee was amazed that to obtain this total Dr Lever had to write to the directors of units and that it could not be found out directly from the MRC. Both Mr Ronald Brown and Mr Kenneth Warren, men whose views lie at opposite ends of the political spectrum, said that this demonstrated that the Medical Research Council was not adequately meeting the present needs of government. Mr Airey Neave, the chairman, expressed some surprise that this had not been brought to the attention of the government chief scientist and that it had taken more than three months for the error to be exposed.

Dr J. A. B. Gray, Secretary of the council, defended the MRC's system for the classification of work, and stressed that the £9,000 mentioned by Lord Rothschild only took into consideration the work done at the National Institute for Medical Research, Mill Hill, on the lifetime of cells and that other problems that were particularly relevant to old age were classified under headings such as cardiovascular disease and lung disease with no direct reference to ageing. Dr Gray did say, however, that the council could quote a sum for research into ageing and old age research but that it would have to be extracted from several programmes.

The select committee was surprised that this argument had not been given in the MRC's submission to the Secretary of State for Education and Science on the green paper, but Dr Gray pointed out that the submission was not the last word on the topic and that further discussions with the department were planned.

With the enthusiasm of the select committee visibly waning in the fourth public session of evidence—only half of the members were present and one was considerably more interested

in his mail than the proceedings—it fell to Dr M. F. Perutz, Director of the MRC's Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, to throw some light on the problem. He pointed out that it was impossible to solve the problems of medicine "head-on" and that the causes of diseases can only be discovered if scientists have a better knowledge of what goes on in the cell. The National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, recognize this by having, apparently, several institutes that study different aspects of health, but according to Dr Perutz most of the work within the institutes is molecular biology.

Dr Perutz and Dr Lever thought that the customer-contractor principle would lower the morale of the scientist in Britain. In a particular laboratory in the United States, according to Dr Perutz, there is a sharp distinction

between people working on contracts and on grants; the contract people tend to be exclusively "9 to 5" scientists whereas the scientists on grants have the traditional university attitude of ignoring the clock. The fear that Dr Perutz and Dr Lever expressed was that wholesale implementations of Lord Rothschild's recommendations would see the same attitudes develop in Britain. In the circumstances it was disappointing that the session ended on a sour note with Mr Ronald Brown being distinctly rude to Dr Perutz by saying that it was disgraceful for him to suggest that scientists would become "clerkish" if a customer-contractor principle was instituted. Mr Brown was also unimpressed with the case put forward by the MRC and his final words were that there was no evidence to show that the council was meeting the needs of the country.

POWER GENERATION

What Role for Coal?

COAL is a dying industry—so the pundits have been saying for years. And when the miner's strike is over, it is possible that the one industry to have suffered irreparably will be the coal industry.

Ten years ago the situation would have been much worse. In 1960-1 91 per cent of Britain's gas came from coal, as well as 84 per cent of the electricity. Today only 2 per cent of Britain's gas is made from coal while 73 per cent of electricity is still coal based.

The reason for the dramatic fall in the dependence of gas on coal is, of course, North Sea gas, and it is unlikely that the gas industry will require large amounts of coal again before the end of the century—the earliest that natural gas could run out.

But electricity's high dependence on coal is the result of government pressure on the industry to continue to use it to ease the rate at which the pits are run down. In their last annual reports both the CEBG and the Electricity Council complained that the tie to coal was forcing their prices up and their flexibility down.

The electricity industry has long fought the government on having to use so much coal, and it is likely that the latest crisis will result in renewed demands to be allowed to use natural gas for power generation and to convert more coal fired stations to dual oil and coal firing.

The writing has been on the wall for

some time. In the coal shortage which the CEBG became aware of in 1969, the government gave permission for five coal firing stations to be converted to dual oil and coal firing. Since then permission has followed for five more conversions in spite of the government's continued policy of supporting coal. In the past three years two stations have been converted to dual natural gas and coal firing with gas being used when it is plentiful, but in time of high demand the supply is cut off and the stations revert to coal firing.

One other clear sign of the CEBG's attitude to coal stations comes from its proposed building programme. Of the fifteen stations for which permission has been obtained or sought, only one is for a coal fired station, Drax II in Yorkshire. Consent has been granted for it, but ominously the CEBG has not gone ahead with construction.

In figures quoted by Mr E. S. Booth of the CEBG, 78 per cent of electricity will be generated by fossil fuels in 1980 with 22 per cent by nuclear power. By the year 2000 he conjectures that the figures will be 60 per cent nuclear and only 40 per cent fossil.

If the CEBG gets its way and is allowed to place greater dependence on oil—especially if the £2 a ton tax on oil is removed—and if the price of coal continues to rise, it is unlikely that coal will be playing that large a part in fuel generation by the end of the century.