

Set up in 1917 by President Wilson, the National Research Council is administered by the council of the academy; it is the organization which is responsible for carrying out the studies contracted by the academy. Organized as a mirror of the academy, the NRC has a number of divisions which roughly correspond to the chief scientific disciplines, and the chief thrust of the reorganizations proposed last week is designed to make the NRC more able to carry out multidisciplinary studies. In short, what is being proposed is that the NRC be reorganized into three assemblies, which will be concerned respectively with physical sciences, life sciences and social and behavioural sciences, and which would concern themselves with the welfare of their component disciplines. In addition to the assemblies, there will be set up a series of boards and commissions, each concerned with a continuing problem such as transportation, the environment or communication, and each spanning a number of scientific disciplines. It is suggested that the assemblies may provide a source of manpower for the various studies assigned to the boards and commissions, and that the whole organization would be governed by a board consisting in the main of the executive committee of the council of the National Academy of Sciences.

Another idea which may soon be brought into practice is to tackle some particularly tough problems (such as the study of the social, technical and economic implications of the water pollution control bill, that may be assigned to the academy by congress) with a committee staffed by postdoctoral students on a half-time basis. The suggestion is that the committee staff would do most of the donkey work for the committee members, in effect providing them with the basic information on which to make their recommendations.

Such a structure for the NRC was, in fact, proposed in 1969, shortly after Handler took over the presidency of the academy, but until now it has been bogged down by disagreements between the academy of sciences and the National Academy of Engineering. The basis of the disagreement is that although the National Research Council constitutes the operating arm of both the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering, responsibility for its governance is vested almost entirely in the hands of the NAS. The NAS has so far been reluctant to press ahead with reorganizing the National Research Council until it has settled its differences with the academy of engineering, but it now seems that it has been decided to go ahead regardless. Handler said last week that "the National Academy of Engineering is still in the house and I

hope it will stay in. There's no reason to think otherwise."

Whatever the result of the negotiations with the NAE, the National Academy of Sciences is clearly at a critical stage in its development. The challenges lying ahead are many, and its involvement in government decision making is clearly growing apace. It has a valuable role to play in the development of policies concerning science and technology, but its influence will depend in some large measure on the public recognition and acceptance that it can gain. That is why it is vital to settle the internal disagreements and differences of opinion over the handling of classified studies before the organization's public credibility is damaged. The next year or so is going to be a testing time for the academy in many respects.

#### AMERICAN PHYSICAL SOCIETY

### Physicists in Protest

by our Washington Correspondent  
ANOTHER venerable scientific organization, the American Physical Society, also saw its internal disagreements come to the surface last week. Like many other scientific societies, the APS has witnessed over the past few years growing activism from its younger members, who are concerned to change the organization from a learned society into a professional organization concerned with physicists and not just with physics. This movement has found its chief expression in an attempt to amend the APS constitution by grafting on to the present charter, which states "the object of the society shall be the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of physics", the words "... in order to increase man's understanding of nature and to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of life for all people. The Society shall assist its members in the pursuit of these humane goals, and it shall shun those activities which are judged to contribute harmfully to the welfare of mankind".

Proposed by Robert H. March of the University of Wisconsin, and backed by about 275 other members of the society, the proposed constitutional amendment provided something of a talking point at the Spring meeting of the society, held in Washington last week, but it will not be put to a vote until the Autumn when members will ballot by mail.

The chief discussion of the amendment came in a debate, staged on the opening day of the meeting, which should have taken place between March and an opponent supporting the status quo. But in the event, the conservative wing of the association had a hard time finding a spokesman and March debated his amendment with Earl Callen of American University, a supporter of the intent of the amendment but not of its wording. Opposition to March's amend-

ment was based almost entirely on its attempt to steer the society into shunning those activities that are judged to be harmful to mankind.

Callen and several others have pointed out the obvious pitfalls inherent in such a suggestion. Its implication would clearly be to discipline or even expel those members who are judged to be doing "antisocial science," but the concept of a committee of the physical society sitting in judgment over a section of the membership is abhorrent to those who spoke against the proposal last week. And March's reply to his critics will do little to change their minds. Speaking in a press conference, March admitted that the wording of the amendment is unfortunate, but suggested that "there has been more heat than light in the way in which it has been interpreted". He said that he would not like to see the society draw up a code of ethics that the membership would have to follow, but saw the amendment as simply opening the way for discussion of many issues that are at present precluded by the restrictive way in which the society's executive committee interprets the constitution.

To support his case, March drew attention to a peculiar series of events surrounding the debut last week of the Forum on Physics and Society, a newly formed section of the American Physical Society whose objectives are summed up in its title. Formally established at the society's meeting held in January this year, the forum held its first symposium last week—a series of discussion papers on physicists and the Vietnam war. But although the papers presented at the symposium were judged by the organizing committee to be consistent with the forum's by-laws, the society's Executive secretary, Dr W. Havens of Cornell University, considered that since they deal with physicists and not with physics, they do not fit in with the society's constitution. He therefore decided that their abstracts should not be printed in the *Bulletin of the American Physical Society* with abstracts of other papers presented at the meeting.

March suggested that there is a damaging conflict when a legitimate section of the Physical Society sponsors a discussion which is ruled outside the terms of the society's constitution. He believes that it is incumbent on the society to provide a discussion of the ethical questions involved in undertaking research, for example, into weapons that are being used in the Vietnam war, but it became clear from his remarks that he is not happy himself about the amendment which bears his name. Asked whether he believes that it will be passed by the membership, March replied "I am sort of like George Wallace. I am quite confident that I am going to lose, but I am trying to send a message".