

SELECT COMMITTEE

Docksey Report Surfaces

THE government was sharply criticized last week by the Select Committee for Science and Technology. In its first report of the new session, the committee attacks the government's secretive approach to the advice it obtains and, for good measure, publishes the much-discussed inquiry into the National Research Development Corporation and other aspects of government-funded development and exploitation of inventions which Mr Patrick Docksey carried out for the Department of Trade and Industry. Mr John Davies, then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, refused to publish the report earlier this year.

Mr Airey Neave, chairman of the select committee, said last week that he was concerned not so much with the contents of Mr Docksey's report as with the principle that the government appears willing to suppress a report simply because it disagrees with its conclusions. When Mr Davies gave evidence to the select committee in May 1972, he said that the government would perhaps not publish the Docksey report at all "if they were to reach the conclusion that it was incompatible with the government's broad approach to research and development".

The select committee strongly disagrees with this view. "Too often governments seek to avoid being questioned on aspects of policy by appointing an inquiry," the committee says, "then refusing to make any comment on the subject until the inquiry has reported. This advice becomes doubly objectionable if the government then decides not to publish the report."

The select committee's publication of the report brings to a head many months of disagreement between the committee and the Department of Trade and Industry. The Docksey report was widely reputed to be investigating among other things the future of the National Research Development Corporation. It was commissioned in 1971 from Mr Patrick Docksey, formerly general manager of BP's Research and Technical Development Department, who reported in December 1971. The select committee asked Mr Davies to publish the report in May, and in July took evidence from Mr Docksey after Mr Davies had refused publication. Mr Docksey said he saw no reason why the report should not be published, so the select committee, using its power "to send for persons, papers and records", requested that they be sent the report which they received in September.

Mr Neave, explaining that the select committee's action in publishing a report that the government has refused

to publish is without precedent, went on to say that "the practice has been established that the government does not publish anything if it can be avoided. What is essential for the future is that the select committee should not be obstructed with regard to documents that are the subject of their work". Mr Neave added that the select committee is to send for, and will consider publishing, the Vintner report on thermal reactors, another report that the government has suppressed.

The Docksey report itself, which Mr Neave rightly describes as an "unsensational document", recommends that a development council be set up to act as a decision and accounting centre for all government-funded development work on projects that have been proved feasible and had their commercial possibilities defined (other than projects developed specifically by a department for its own use), and to oversee the activities of NRDC. Exploitation of inventions should be managed by two groups, one, the NRDC, responsible for all government-funded civil inventions from the research councils, universities and government laboratories other than the Department of Trade and Industry establishments, and the other to cover the DTI establishments' activities.

The NRDC, Mr Docksey says, should continue to seek out inventions arising from the research councils and universities, but should use university industrial liaison groups and officers as its agents, rather than, in the first instance, exploring the possibilities itself.

ENVIRONMENT

Radioactive Levels

THE amount of radioactivity deposited by rainwater in Britain continues to decrease as it has done every year since the early 1960s. In the first six months of 1972 the amount of atmospheric activity deposited at several sites in Britain was only one half of that deposited a year earlier and a twentieth of that deposited during the early 1960s, according to the UK Atomic Energy Authority (*Radioactive Fallout in Air and Rain*, HMSO, £1).

Thirty-five per cent of the atmospheric activity in the early part of this year in Britain can be attributed to a Chinese nuclear weapon exploded on October 14, 1970, and ten per cent to a later Chinese explosion on March 18 of this year.

The estimated total amount of radioactive strontium-90 and caesium-137 deposited on the Earth as a result of atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons has been constant since about 1966. This stability is due to the fact that the 0.44 megacuries of radioactive caesium

and the 0.26 megacuries of radioactive strontium which has been the average amount deposited world-wide in the past five years merely replaces the amounts of these isotopes which have decayed during the year to stable isotopes.

The Harwell team also reports on the amounts of barium-140 found in the atmosphere soon after a nuclear explosion. During late 1971 and the first few months of 1972, barium-140 of half life 12.8 days was detected at stations throughout the world on three separate occasions. In late November and early December 1971, nuclear products of the Chinese explosion of November 18, 1971, were detected at Harwell. The isotope was next detected during the middle of January and its intensity in the atmosphere finally became too small to detect in early March. The third and largest concentration of barium-140 was detected at the end of March—products of the Chinese explosion of March 18.

METEOROLOGY

Pacific Typhoons?

from a Correspondent

THE Typhoon Committee of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East has now reviewed progress in the improvement of typhoon warning stations, communications and warning systems within Asia and the Far East. At the fifth annual meeting of the committee held in Bangkok during November, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Thailand welcomed the Khmer Republic (Cambodia) as a new member of the committee. Australia, France, Germany, the United States and the Soviet Union sent observers.

The United States reported at the meeting on the progress of the Storm Fury project, designed to decrease the intensity of typhoons by cloud seeding, supposed to induce rainfall and hence to decrease the intensity of a storm by broadening the area from which latent heat is released. The results of the experiments are so far inconclusive and effects which have been observed could not categorically be ascribed to seeding.

Efforts to reduce evaporation from the sea in the path of typhoons—the energy source of the storm—by spraying the sea with chemicals have also failed because of the rapid distortion of the chemical film by the violent turbulence at the sea surface.

So far, the Storm Fury project has been confined to the Atlantic in spite of the efforts of the ECAFE Typhoon Committee to transfer it to the Pacific where there are more storms each year to test the techniques. The project cannot now be transferred to the Pacific before 1975.