

## NEW WORLD

# AAAS at the Crossroads

from our Washington Correspondent

ALTHOUGH eight people were arrested during a clash with police, the 139th annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, held in Washington last week, was one of the quietest for several years. Members of a radical group of scientists known as SESPA (Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action), which campaigns under the slogan "Science for the People" and which has added a touch of colour, if not of harmony, to the previous three AAAS meetings, were notably thin on the ground—there were no tomatoes thrown at politicians or stabbings with knitting needles—events which have grabbed the headlines at past AAAS gatherings.

Instead, participants in the meeting were confronted with an array of lectures and symposia dealing with issues ranging from pollution control, economic growth and social responsibility to esoteric discussions of research results. Like the annual meetings of the British Association, the AAAS gatherings have become notably more political in the past few years—due in part to the proddings of SESPA—and they are increasingly running up against the knotty problem of what function they are meant to fulfil. But the AAAS, again like the BA, may itself be destined for yet more changes, for later this year a meeting will be held to discuss the future of the association and its annual meetings. That, indeed, was one theme which was often discussed last week, both in the programmed sessions and outside them.

As for the meeting itself, the event which led to the arrests was an extremely silly affair. The AAAS board of directors decided in advance of the meeting that it would take a stronger line this year against any radicals who disrupted sessions, and as a first step it forbade any organization not affiliated to the AAAS to set up literature stalls or distribute leaflets. SESPA decided, however, to ignore the ban and, as it has in the past, set up a stall in the registration area from which to peddle its wares. After a day of bickering, Dr Richard A. Scribner, the meeting director, called in the police to remove the table. Scuffling broke out and seven scientists and a reporter were arrested. SESPA screamed about freedom of speech, but Scribner replied that everybody has a chance to be heard in the meetings, and that rules are rules. In the meantime,

SESPA was offered, and later grudgingly accepted, a table in a less conspicuous place. The result: AAAS officials provided SESPA with great publicity and eight people have been charged with disorderly conduct.

Another potentially explosive situation was headed off later in the week when Dr Daniel P. Moynihan decided for the second year in succession to miss a meeting rather than face an unruly audience. Moynihan was due to chair a meeting on public policy and social science, but cried off because he said he had to go to a briefing at the State Department on his new appointment as Ambassador to India. He was, however, bitterly attacked in a leaflet distributed throughout the conference in the morning—it was alleged that his work for the White House has led to cutbacks in services to minorities—and the meeting of which he should have been chairman was overflowing. Dr Harold Orlans, a member of the Brookings Institution and one of the panellists at the meeting, later rebuked Moynihan for finding an hour to have lunch with the panel, but not even half an hour to discuss his views with the rest of the meeting. The session eventually proceeded with only minor disruption.

Apart from those few distractions, participants in the meeting were fed a diet of lectures and symposia which, although increasingly concerned with issues of science and society, are still

heavily weighted towards the presentation of scientific papers supposedly dealing with topics of general public interest, but often attended only by specialists. This year's meeting was split in the ratio of about 60 per cent scientific symposia, about 30 per cent symposia dealing with issues of science and society, and the rest of the meetings were concerned with Washington-area topics, such as community education in Anacostia.

But the meeting also marked a turning point in the association's history, for at a council meeting held on the last day, a set of by-laws was adopted which will allow the new constitution to come into effect on January 15. The AAAS is at last going to become more democratic. Approved at the annual meeting in Philadelphia a year ago, the new constitution provides for the chief officers of the AAAS to be elected by mail ballot of all the members and for the council to be reduced in size and also directly elected by the membership. Previously, the president and board of directors were elected by the council—an undemocratic procedure which has long drawn sharp criticism.

Largely the work of a committee which met under the chairmanship of Dr Leonard Rieser, a physicist from Dartmouth College, who will become president of the AAAS on January 15, the new constitution drastically reduces the size of the council, from more than

## AAAS Opposes the War

IN the dying hours of the conference last week, the AAAS Council took the unprecedented step of harshly criticizing US policy in South-East Asia. The council called for immediate withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and urged that a full scale study be conducted of the long-term effects of the bombing, the use of CS and of herbicides and other methods of defoliation, both on the people and the ecology of Vietnam. The AAAS council specifically threw its support behind a bill introduced into Congress last session by Senator Gaylord Nelson and Representative Gilbert Gude, which calls on President Nixon to ask the National Academy of Sciences to carry out such a study.

Although the Vietnam war has been a chief focus of the protests of radical scientists at AAAS meetings, anti-war

groups have in the past been unable to steer such strongly worded resolutions through the council. Three years ago, however, the council did set up a commission to study the effects of herbicides in Vietnam, the results of which played a part in persuading the Department of Defense to phase out the use of chemical defoliants in the war. What the association is now requesting is that a commission be set up much like the US Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, which made a long-term study of the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Second World War. The chief sponsor of the resolution was Dr E. M. Pfeiffer, of the University of Montana, who was also chiefly responsible for persuading the council to undertake the previous study of defoliants. The war will be on the agenda while it lasts.