

OLD WORLD

Select Committee Picks up the Pieces

THE Select Committee on Science and Technology was taken aback last week when Mr Michael Heseltine, Minister for Aerospace and Shipping, appeared before it and announced that the government had decided to scrap the hovertrain project which Tracked Hovercraft Limited have been running for the past five years at a total cost of about £5 million. At that meeting he announced that the company's work on linear motors would be continued through a joint arrangement between the National Research Development Corporation (NRDC) and Hawker Siddeley under which the government would subscribe £500,000 over four or five years and Hawker Siddeley £100,000. He also said that Tracked Hovercraft's work on magnetic suspension would be carried on by British Rail with the help of a £150,000 grant.

Later that same day he let it be known that there was a strong possibility that a joint company, involving the NRDC, Hawker Siddeley and British Rail, would be formed.

This week the select committee settled down to analyse the rights and wrongs of the decision and to decide whether or not it had been made at the right time. Appearing before it were members of the management of Tracked Hovercraft Limited and representatives of the company's staff association.

Fundamental disagreement with several of Mr Heseltine's reasons for cancelling the project emerged from the meeting. Mr T. G. Fellows, managing director of Tracked Hovercraft, criticized Mr Heseltine's view that there is no prospective market in Britain for the hovertrain, and that "the country would not tolerate the duplication of track" involved in building a hovertrain link between, say, London and Manchester. Mr Fellows pointed out that British Rail itself expected a capacity problem by the mid-1980s, when a British hovertrain might reasonably be expected to be a viable proposition, and would itself be "duplicating" track or looking for new routes altogether. As far as possible environmental damage is concerned, Mr Fellows said that a hovertrain track need not be completely elevated, but could be partly laid at ground level or in tunnels. And he added that noise gave "no grounds for concern".

Tracked Hovercraft also disputed Mr Heseltine's estimates of the journey time for a hovertrain on a route from London to Maplin Sands, the proposed

site for the third London airport. Mr Heseltine had said that a hovertrain would take 36 minutes to do the journey whereas the company estimate a time of about 20 minutes. Mr Fellows said that as he had understood the views of the Department of the Environment, British Rail's Advanced Passenger Train would form the first link in 1980 and the hovertrain would supplement it in the 1980s or 1990s. It would serve both as a showcase and as the first of a series of inter-city links.

Members of the staff association took Mr Heseltine to task for his lukewarm attitude to the prospects of European cooperation on research into high-speed ground transport. In its submission to the select committee the association says that the European commission "is expected to approve before this April, a policy for a network of routes for Europe including Britain" and that the commission has recommended that European governments should engage

in joint research into new transport media, notably tracked hovercraft. Mr M. R. Bailey contended that when Mr Heseltine had spoken of a lack of foreseeable demand in the home market, he had failed to take proper account of how bound up Britain now is with the rest of Europe.

Mr Fellows described what seemed to him to have been a change of heart within the Department of the Environment about the hovertrain at the end of last year. Before then, he said, there had been a good prospect of his company combining resources with British Rail to their mutual advantage. Mr Bailey suggested that because of the troubles with the Advanced Passenger Train, for example with the gas turbine propulsion system, the suspension system and the general structure, the Department of the Environment no longer has money available to fund the contracts which Tracked Hovercraft needed.

ENERGY POLICY

Robens's Solution

AN independent Energy Commission to advise the government on energy policy was called for this week by Lord Robens, former chairman of the National Coal Board and now chairman of Vickers.

Lord Robens said that the commission should be a permanent body staffed by experts in fuels economics and in the specialist technologies. It should undertake comprehensive long and short term studies and its remit should include coal, gas, electricity, oil and nuclear power.

"The commission, having no particular energy axe to grind would be able to objectively produce an energy policy, planned entirely in the national interest . . . the in-fighting between the publicly owned energy industries would cease, as their place in the energy pattern would be properly established".

The resources of the Department of Trade and Industry are totally inadequate to do the task, according to Lord Robens. Attacking the 1967 White Paper on energy, which he described as a miserable failure, Lord Robens pointed out that the civil servants responsible for it "are no longer there to face the consequences of its impotence". A permanent com-

mission would be able to accomplish more than any *ad hoc* body.

Lord Robens, who was delivering the Potterton Lecture to the Institution of Heating and Ventilating Engineers, said that "without the slightest doubt, energy resources over the next ten years are going to be sorely stretched." He pointed out that "to an advanced industrial economy such as ours, the importance of secure energy supplies is out of all proportion to the cost . . . short term commercial price considerations should not be allowed to obscure the very real need for security of supply".

The commission would resolve the questions of who is to carry spare capacity and stocks, of how competition between indigenous fuels can be limited so the national interest is best served, and of how the commercial "rules" under which energy interests operate should be re-assessed in order to give a greater weight to long term considerations.

If the government struggles on to produce an energy policy from its own resources it will surely fail as miserably as it failed in the energy white paper of 1967, Lord Robens said. "Only an independent commission, in my view, would get the juxtaposition of coal, gas, electricity, oil and even nuclear energy about right".