

NEW WORLD

President Nixon takes a firmer stand on Energy

by our Washington Correspondent

JUST two months ago, President Nixon informed Congress that the United States was facing an "energy challenge" which required little more to set right than some tinkering with import and price controls. But by last week, his assessment of the situation had changed. He told Congress that the energy shortage is now "one of the most critical problems on America's agenda", and he put forward a set of much more radical proposals for dealing with it.

Among the new measures is \$100 million in new money for energy research with the promise of much more to come, a proposal to establish a new energy research and development agency modelled around the laboratories of the Atomic Energy Commission, a conservation drive aimed at reducing consumption of energy in the United States by 5% over the coming year, and the appointment of Governor John A. Love of Colorado to the directorship of a new energy policy office in the White House. The new proposals have met with considerably more enthusiasm than the previous set, but they still leave many questions unanswered.

The proposal which has met with almost unanimous approval is the move to increase funding for energy research and development. President Nixon's intention is to add \$100 million to his original proposal for \$772 million to be spent in the 1973-4 financial year on research into new sources of energy. But he also made clear that it will be just the first instalment of a programme which will soak up \$10,000 million over five years, beginning in the 1974-5 financial year. At least half of the \$100 million is earmarked for coal research, while the rest will be split between advanced energy conversion systems, environmental control, geothermal energy, conservation and gas cooled nuclear reactors.

The list of projects will at least please those who have been arguing that the

government's energy policy is at fault for putting too much money into the fast breeder reactor at the expense of other projects. And it may also help to erode Congressional support for a bill sponsored in the Senate by Senator Henry M. Jackson, which calls for expenditure on energy research and development of \$2,000 million a year over the next ten years (see *Nature*, 242, 224; 1973). But the message is vague about where the money will come from since President Nixon says only that it must be found within the overall budget ceiling, presumably by taking it away from a less deserving cause.

The plans for splitting up the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to create the new Energy Research and Development Administration, and for establishing a new cabinet-level Department of Energy and Natural Resources, have also provoked little opposition so far, although they have prompted many questions. As described in the message, the Department of Energy and Natural Resources will take over all the functions of the Department of Interior except for those concerned with energy research and development, and the natural resource functions of other departments including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, lock, stock and barrel.

As for energy research and development, the idea is to split off the regulatory and licensing functions of the AEC and to use the remainder—chiefly the national laboratories—as the nucleus of an Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), which would also take in the energy research and development programmes of the Department of Interior. "The scientific and technological resources of the AEC should provide a solid foundation for building a well-conceived and well-executed effort", President Nixon said.

But it seems that ERDA will have a few strangers in the pack, for it will also contain the weapons and physical research programmes of the AEC. There has recently been talk of turning nuclear weapons production over to the Department of Defense, but that would require an amendment to the Atomic Energy Act which would negate the original intention to keep nuclear weapons firmly under civilian control. Such a move is, however, still on the cards.

What are the chances that the plan will be approved by Congress? First, it has some points which favour its passage

through the Congressional mill, including the support of Congressman Chet Hollifield of California, Chairman of the House Government Operations Committee to which it has been referred. But it also has some points against, including considerable confusion about whether or not it requires an amendment to the Atomic Energy Act and hence the approval of the powerful Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. Whatever happens, it is not clear whether the Joint Committee will continue to have oversight over ERDA and the present licensing and regulatory functions of the AEC (which would remain under the control of five commissioners). Also in the air is the question of who will take over the directorship of ERDA if it is given the green light from Congress, but there is little question that the present chairman of the AEC, Dr Dixie Lee Ray, is the strongest contestant at present on the books.

Congressional sources predicted this week that there is little chance that the reorganization plan will be approved by Congress this year. The House Government Operations Committee is, however, planning to hold preliminary hearings on July 24-26.

As for energy conservation, President Nixon has set targets for reduction of energy consumption throughout the United States of 5 per cent over the coming year, and a separate target of 7 per cent for the federal government. But he has provided no stick, such as gasoline taxes or penalties for large automobiles, to enforce the reduction. As for the federal government, the chief energy consumer is the Department of Defense, which will in any case cut down its fuel consumption when it is forced to stop bombing Cambodia. Federal departments have until July 31 to report on the specific steps they will take to meet the target. But even without any measures to force reduction of private consumption of energy, President Nixon's forceful exhortations to curb demand represent a considerable improvement over the mild statements that characterized his previous message.

Finally, Nixon's choice of Governor Love to take charge of the White House Energy Policy Office is also likely to placate his critics. A liberal Republican who has established a reputation for independence, Love has been given broad powers for formulating and coordinating energy policies. His appointment does not require confirmation by Congress.

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