

spot hormone assays. At present in Oldham, Mr Steptoe and Dr Edward have to rely on assays produced by a commercial company, with a consequent delay of 24 to 36 hours in obtaining the results. With timing of such importance in the entire process, an immediate assay from either blood or urine would be a great boost to the work.

SELECT COMMITTEE

Critical Comment

SPARING no feelings, the Select Committee for Science and Technology has laid the blame for the demise of Tracked Hovercraft Limited (THL) on the doorstep of what seems to be everyone associated with the project. In the committee's report on THL published yesterday (*Third Report from the Select Committee on Science and Technology, Tracked Hovercraft Limited*, Commons Paper 420, £0.365), the National Research Development Corporation, the Department of the Environment, and the Department of Trade and Industry, as well as various managers and ministers, emerge with far from unblemished reputations. But Professor Eric Laithwaite of Imperial College emerges as the poor, downtrodden hero of the entire affair.

The National Research Development Corporation is criticized for being a poor employer—"in our view the conduct of the NRDC towards the staff of THL falls far short of that expected of a good employer", and for not taking "sufficient action to obtain a definite decision from the government during 1971 and 1972". The select committee is also convinced that the structure of the NRDC is in need of "urgent financial review". In the light of the THL experience the select committee feels that the financial constraints placed on the corporation are excessive and that "the existing organization is ill-suited to the management of complex developments". Accordingly, the committee feels that the time is ripe for a high level review of the "organization needed to develop innovation" and the terms of reference of the review should be wide enough for the organization of government departments to be considered also.

The Department of Trade and Industry is criticised for its procrastination during the entire affair, and the committee admits that it was startled by the department's action "in making over to a private company [Hawker Siddeley] on a preferential basis, technology either owned by NRDC or existing at Imperial College".

The select committee states that in its opinion the "Minister for Transport Industries and his Department evidently had no interest in the THL company whatever and precious little in the technology". "It is incomprehensible", continues the committee, "that the

department responsible for future transport requirements remained so aloof from an advanced transport project".

But Professor Eric Laithwaite, who held the committee spellbound when he gave evidence, is compared with Sir Frank Whittle. The attitude of official witnesses to Professor Laithwaite, says the committee "was an uncomfortable reminder of the treatment of Sir Frank Whittle by earlier governments". It is of little surprise that the committee recommends that the government should accept the proposals made by Professor Laithwaite and Imperial College that a "multi-user test facility" be set up at Earith under the auspices of Imperial College "for the testing and development of large linear motors, high speed suspension systems and related technology". But the committee are only too aware that this suggestion was given a most cool reception by Mr Michael Heseltine, Minister for Aerospace, when he appeared before them in July.

Mr Heseltine had his knuckles rapped by the committee for his handling of the announcement of the closure of THL. On February 12, Mr Heseltine announced in the House of Commons that the government was still considering whether or not to provide financial assistance to continue work at Earith, but evidence obtained from Mr Heseltine two days later revealed that the decision to cease work at Earith had

been taken on January 29. The committee concludes that "Mr Heseltine's answer to Mr Stoddart's question . . . was therefore untrue".

But THL is now defunct and nothing that the select committee can do can resurrect the project in its original form. The committee is very concerned that such an occurrence should not happen in future and it again raises one of its favourite hobby horses that there should be a minister in the cabinet who "would bring about a significant improvement in the management of research and development".

The track still exists at Earith and the select committee feels that it should be put to use immediately. The government, says the committee, should defray any costs connected with the retention of the site and its equipment and the completion of the test track. The government should also meet the initial running costs of the centre by way of direct annual grant, including the costs of a permanent staff which will be responsible for the day to day management of the site.

The committee, as a nudge to Dr Dahrendorf, who has recently produced a policy for research in Europe based on collaborative research programmes, recommends to the government that it should use the facilities at Earith "within a European Research and Development programme".

ARBORICULTURE

1974—Save a Tree Year?

PRESSURE is mounting for an increase in research on amenity trees. Following the recent ravages of Dutch Elm disease in Britain, an independent working party on research priorities for amenity trees was set up by the Association of British Tree Surgeons and Arborists last year. It is due to report shortly.

The working party—which includes members of the Forestry Commission, the Natural Environment Research Council, the Association of British Tree Surgeons and various other interested bodies—has taken as its remit a complete review of the situation in Britain, which, is so impoverished that only about £10,000 a year is spent on research on amenity trees other than elms, which have received more attention since the Dutch Elm epidemic.

But Dutch elm disease is only part of the story. Dr R. G. Pawsey of the Department of Forestry, University of Oxford and a member of the working party, pointed out in a lecture to the British Association annual meeting recently, that other diseases—beech bark disease, sooty bark disease among sycamores, ash decline and honey

fungus—are wreaking great damage among amenity trees. And this in a year in which the British public is being exhorted to plant trees.

Estimates of the damage caused by these diseases is largely guesswork as no survey of them has ever been undertaken. The fear is that too little will be done too late, for lack of basic information about amenity trees. Professor F. T. Last, Director of the Natural Environment Research Council's Institute of Tree Biology and chairman of the working party, is a known advocate of greater expenditure on amenity tree research, and it seems likely that when the working party's report emerges later this year or early next, it is going to demand that more money be spent on an area of research that has been largely ignored in Britain. The working party has not reached any conclusions yet, but it is known that there is a high measure of agreement between the members of the committee as to what should be done.

The need is clearly felt among those in the field for a research unit specifically to study amenity trees, for a regular survey of disease among these trees, and for an information service to tell local authorities and the public what to do about amenity tree diseases.