

Outlook with Labour

MR WILSON has eventually secured what most expected him to, and the political outlook, precarious as it is, is unlikely to force him into another election before he has had time to govern for six months to a year.

It was apparent immediately Mr Wilson announced his Cabinet that this was not to be a palliative government, shaped to defuse the Liberals and other parties. Three key posts, Employment, Industry and Trade go to three left-wingers Messrs Foot, Benn and Shore—vigorous proponents of nationalisation and renegotiation of the European Treaty. Unlikely as it is that moves towards nationalisation will come in the next few months, it is almost certain that within a year this Labour Government would be moving towards public ownership in several industries.

The three appointments that will most interest British scientists are those of Mr Roy Mason to Defence, Mr Eric Varley to Energy and Mr Reg Prentice to Education and Science.

Defence isn't what it used to be. The great debates on Britain's nuclear deterrent and her world posture are now part of history and there is a deep lack of interest in defence problems. The only highly visible role of the armed forces is in Northern Ireland, the last and most insoluble of the colonial peace-keeping problems. This is an operation that many tough-minded citizens would like to see terminated 'to let the Irish sort it out for themselves', and certainly few outside military circles give military matters much thought.

This is a bad situation. The military mind left to its own devices will expand outrageously. Mr Mason is committed by the Labour Party's manifesto to prune hundreds of millions of pounds off defence spending and will meet fierce resistance. In the past two years military research and development expenditure, having declined steadily for years as a fraction of total military expenditure, suddenly started to rise again. Much is in the pipeline, such as the Multi-Role Combat Aircraft and improvements to the Polaris fleet. Mr Mason will, no doubt, squash plans for the refitting of Polaris. He might well start enquiries into the long term future of anti-submarine warfare and nuclear weapons development.

Mr Varley comes into a young ministry and has many well-wishers. Not, as one newspaper put it, because "his mining experience should be useful" as if years of handling coal gave one a special insight into energy problems shared only by petrol-pump attendants. Rather, his is a relatively unknown face and there is hope that a fresh mind, not too blunted by previous political battles, could do a good job in this demanding ministry.

The first major issue that he will have to consider is the nuclear reactor question. This is one of those de-

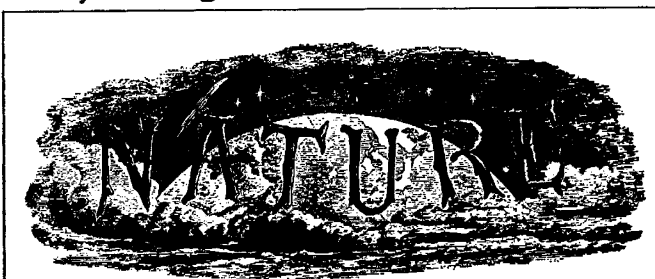
isions in politics which despite all the finely calculated analyses and extensive documentation will be made on instinct. Noises before the election suggested that the instincts are rather strongly against light water reactors, and in favour of the very cautious step of more magnox reactors.

Mr Prentice is rather a surprise at Education and Science. He had been at the ministry before at a junior level, but has recently been 'shadowing' employment. However, his well-known dislike of the left-wing made that an impossible post for him. Education and Science may still only be a temporary staging post.

It is most unlikely that science will see any major changes in the year ahead other than those caused by financial constraints. Labour has no plans for altering the present relationship between research councils and the research they sponsor, so for the time being the Rothschild restructuring will presumably be allowed to proceed. Labour likewise does not intend to implement the recent recommendations for student loans and for changing the emphasis to post-experience study for PhDs.

Finally, what of some of today's symbols? Concorde, child of the white hot technological revolution of the 1960s, will no doubt fly for BOAC and Air France and few else: this is a business decision and politicians will be glad to be rid of it. Maplin, London's third airport, will have to wait. And the think tank? One suspects it will stay, and that one or two of *Nature's* readers will end up in it.

100 years ago



In a most interesting article on the planet Mars, in your issue of *NATURE* for Feb. 19, which has just been shown to me, the Rev. T. W. Webb directs attention to the question of the colours of Mars being due to effects of contrast or not, and says—"Nor does it seem to have been noticed that no effect of contrast has been traced in the Polar snows."

Kindly permit me to inform Mr. Webb that, in a paper on Mars in the last volume of the "Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society," I expressly state that, "on May 14, 1873, the south Polar ice appeared (in an 8½-inch silvered glass reflector, by Browning) of quite a pale sky-blue colour, evidently by contrast," and I may add that this effect I noticed also on two or three subsequent occasions.

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EDWARD B. KNOBEL

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