

## See how they run

THE chart in the centre of this week's issue of *Nature* is not, you will be disappointed to hear, the result of furtive investigations by the staff under trying conditions. None of our sub-editors was dispatched with binoculars to phone-boxes in Whitehall to catch glimpses of faceless men doing a quick sprint out of their ministry to black government cars waiting to take them to assignments in other ministries. No laser beams were trained on the curtained windows behind which whispered conferences were being held. All the information is in the public domain. The research was no more exciting than several days of delving through annual reports, some telephone calls and a few fivopenny bus rides to pick up official documents. And in a way the product of the research isn't exciting either. Old hands on the London scene will look at the chart and say that there is nothing on it they didn't know about already—and that there is enough inter- and intra-departmental committee structure in Whitehall to convert our simple little picture into a veritable cat's cradle of inter-connections.

Indeed the old hands are right. The proliferation of working parties, study groups, panels and sub-committees is unending and we could have easily devoted six months of our time to trying to put together a coherent picture of this fine detail. But how many are there who can even be called old hands? The majority of British scientists will probably find that even our elementary chart reveals quite a lot they hadn't realised before. Who runs Kew? Harwell? What ministry pays for space research? How much is spent on defence? How are we represented in Europe? At UNESCO?

It is, of course, almost in the very nature of a central bureaucracy almost exclusively concentrated in one city,

that those on the outside will take a Kafka-esque view of it. Contact with the outside world tends to be through the trusted advisers or council members; criticism from the press is greeted with stony silence; communications from outside tend to leave the individual feeling impotent. And yet the castle is fairly easily penetrable to those who take along a map, and most of its influential inhabitants have been scientists themselves. Moreover, because of the perennial problem that central bureaucracy has in accurately judging the feelings of those at the grass roots, anyone with the ability to communicate with the right bureaucrat at the right time can have a disproportionate influence—for good or bad.

Hardly anyone on this chart could be said to have got there by anything resembling a democratic process, and by the same token hardly anyone could be removed by anything resembling a democratic process. We are not about to advocate annual elections to councils and committees; what we do urge, however, is a much wider understanding of the rudiments of science policy-making, and maybe this chart will help.

Only one committee which we wished to list has had to remain ex-directory. The Defence Scientific Advisory Committee, we have been told (not by its chairman), prefers to remain anonymous, partly for fear of student action against its members. In view of the immense expenditure on defence research and the almost complete ignorance in the academic and student world of defence matters, anonymity can only serve to create further alienation.

● Extra copies of the chart are available. See page iii for details.

## Earthquakes cause cancer: official probe shock

THE annual British Association meeting is upon us again, and so is the silly season for newspapers. Here are a few simplistic headlines science could well do without in the coming week.

Coffee-drinking causes cancer, scientist says

British astronomy leads the world

Concorde's effects harmless—government scientist

Cancer drug hopes

Sex at 80 keeps you fit—scientist

Earthquakes threaten North Sea oil

Tea-drinking causes cancer

Concorde 'will end world as we know it'—environmentalist

British astronomy in doldrums

New X-ray star no hazard to health

Scientists create life in laboratory

Can readers of *Nature* think of any others?