IN BRIEF

Williams the DES

In a Cabinet reshuffle Shirley Williams last week took over the post of UK Secretary of State for Education and Science from Fred Mulley. While Mr. Mulley's low-profile tenure of the post—marked by a period of economic stringency, cuts and out-of-work teachers—led to little in the way of long-term science policy, hopes are high among scientists and policymakers that Mrs. Williams will provide a different style of leadership, taking science under her own wing (rather than leaving it to a junior Minister) and generally infusing some optimism into what is at present a gloomy scene.

Mrs. Williams was a junior Minister for Education and Science between 1967 and 1969; she returns to the Department from her position as Secretary of State for Prices and Consumer Protection, held for the past two years.

More for US research

Government spending on science and technology in the United States is expected to reach \$23,500 million during the fiscal year beginning October 1, according to figures recently published by the National Science Foundation (NSF). That would represent a modest increase from this year's level of support, even when inflation is taken into account.

The welcome increase follows a long period of decline in the federal science budget, as inflation has gradually eroded its purchasing power. The increase will be sufficient only to restore science support to its 1972 level, however, which in turn was 20% below that of 1967, the peak year of federal science support. The growth next year is almost solely attributable to large increases in funding for energy and defence research and development.

New orchid for Britain

Whatever its effects on wildlife in general, this year's warm dry spring brought a notable addition to the British flora: the orchid *Ophrys bertolonii*. A single specimen has been found near Swanage, Dorset, growing in undisturbed downland turf; how it got there will remain a mystery, unless some enthusiast confesses to having planted it there as a seedling some years ago. One of the loveliest and most unmistakable of European orchids *O. bertolonii* is essentially a plant of the western Mediterranean, although it occurs north of the Apennines and is also recorded from Bulgaria.

The notion that the British specimen has been in position for some years without flowering is strengthened by the discovery in Gloucestershire, also this season, of a second species, *O. sphegodes*.

It must have come as a surprise to most people in Britain to learn that, according to the statistics for food consumption recently published by the UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), the nation's population is on average eating less than the minimum diet recommended by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Britons are apparently saved from starvation only by the efforts of the confectionery and brewing industries, whose products contain sugar that makes up for what would otherwise be a significant deficiency in calories.

It is difficult to take these figures seriously. If the average level of consumption is so near the starvation line, then something like half of the UK's population should show symptoms of undernourishment, for the least-privileged members of society probably eat fewest sweets and drink least beer. Yet it is rare to see anyone except a criminally neglected child or an uncared-for elderly recluse, who is seriously underweight. One cannot walk along a city street in Britain without seeing many who are grossly overweight. The school medical service complains about the increase in the number of obese children. Surveys show that as many as 75% of middle-class and middle-aged women, and over 50% of men, worry because they are overweight. Food advertisements push products that are low, not high, in calories. Newspapers are full of diets devised to allow consumers to lose weight without suffering the pangs of hunger. As a nation Britain shows all the signs of overeating, not of consuming

too little. The MAFF not only suggest that Britons eat too little food of any kind, but also that "the quality of food consumed shows a steady decline". This view is based mainly on data showing falls in the consumption of meat and other animal products, and of sugar. But as Dr. J. V. Durnin,

MAFF gaff

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a nutritionist at Glasgow University, has commented in *The Times* newspaper, these changes should be viewed as a limited improvement, and not a deterioration in feeding habits. Moreover, they accord with a recommendation from the Royal College of Physicians.

The MAFF seems intent on perpetuating the fallacy that, because some protein is necessary for health, the consumption of more animal

products leads to better nourishment. Some time ago, the Minister even suggested that any reduction in the amount of meat eaten in Britain would give rise to serious malnutrition. Britain's diet may indeed be changing. Rising costs may be preventing everyone from consuming all the things they might wish to eat. Some people may be getting less pleasure from eating, or, more likely, from overeating. But in presenting dietary data, the MAFF should surely pay heed to the principles of nutrition, rather than to those of hedonism.

Those living in Britain can observe the real situation, but what will observers in other countries, or in organisations like the FAO, make of the MAFF statistics? Will the UK's 55 million citizens be added to the thousands of millions in countries even poorer than Britain already listed as suffering from food shortages? In the past, many statistics published by international bodies have exaggerated world starvation and malnutrition. It is revealing to find that equally exaggerated data can be produced for a country like Britain, where accurate information might be expected.

Yet there are too many hungry and even starving people in the world today. There are many countries where overeating is not, as it is in Britain, the main cause of 'malnutrition'. The problem can only be solved if there are accurate statistics for food consumption, and proper estimates of food requirements, for all countries. A start should be made by producing such information for Britain.