

IN BRIEF

Synthetic fuel block

A controversial plan to pump billions of dollars of federal funds into the commercial production of synthetic fuels in the United States was unexpectedly killed off in the House of Representatives last week. By the narrow margin of 193 votes to 192, the House blocked further consideration of a Bill to provide up to \$4,000 million for the construction of large-scale plants to produce oil from shale, and oil and gas from coal. The vote means that there is now no chance that Congress will pass the legislation before it breaks up for the November elections. The Bill was a major plank in the Ford Administration's long-term energy strategy, which calls for the production of large quantities of synthetic fuels by the mid-1990s to replace dwindling domestic supplies of oil and gas. It was defeated by an odd assortment of bed-fellows ranging from environmentalists fearing the pollution threat from conversion plants, to right-wingers opposing federal subsidies for industry.

Energy get-together?

Democratic Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter last week offered a plan to consolidate an assortment of government agencies in the United States into a single Department of Energy. Stating that "our country still has no energy policy" three years after the 1973 oil embargo, Carter said that the new department would include the Energy Research and Development Administration, the Federal Energy Administration, parts of the departments of Commerce and Interior, together with the Federal Power Commission. The plan would have a tough time getting through Congress if Carter is ever in a position to propose it formally, however. Former President Nixon twice suggested the setting up of a Cabinet-level department of energy and natural resources, but the reorganisation was never approved by Congress because it would have cut across the jurisdictions of many Congressional committees, which now roughly match those of existing departments and agencies.

Bangladesh council

The Government of Bangladesh has constituted a National Council for Science and Technology to plan the country's scientific and technological programme and activities. The high powered council is chaired by the President of Bangladesh, and one of the two vice-chairman is an eminent scientist who is also the Science Adviser to the President, Professor M. Innas Ali.

The council has 19 other members who are *ex-officio* chairmen of research councils, secretaries of some ministries, Vice-Chancellors of two technological universities and two reputable Bangladesh scientists or technologists nominated by the President. Professor Ali himself has a distinguished career in scientific research, education and administration. He holds a Master's degree in electric engineering from the University of New York, a doctorate in nuclear physics from the University of London; and is a former Vice-Chancellor of Chittagong University.

SECRECY, in science as in politics, is a delicate and difficult subject. There is much concern when the details of Cabinet deliberation are prematurely revealed, yet at the same time there is a strong campaign for the relaxation and rationalisation of the Official Secrets Act. It is difficult to strike a happy medium. The results of scientific research concerned with military problems or commercial activity may legitimately be kept secret for a time, but it often seems that publication of much of this work is delayed unnecessarily. Some results which might have a wide application never see the light of day, even when the defence of the country is no longer at risk, and when no benefits would immediately accrue to a company's commercial rivals.

The reputation of a scientist depends largely on the quality and quantity of his published work. If he is unable to publish, he is likely to remain unknown except among his immediate colleagues. It is therefore important to the individual, as well as to the scientific community, that as few restrictions as possible be placed upon the publication of the results of any kind of research. High salaries, or even the award of honours and decorations to otherwise unknown scientists may be poor recompense for the denial of proper recognition within the scientific community.

When the reorganisation of

government-supported research attributed to Lord Rothschild was being discussed, there was some concern that it might have a harmful effect on the dissemination of scientific know-

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ledge. It was feared that the executive government departments, to whom so much of the research funds was to be transferred—so that they, as "customers", could place "contracts" with research councils or other laboratories—might be reluctant to allow the scientists who did the work to publish their results in the accepted scientific journals. These particular

fears appear to have been unfounded. Some senior ministry officials have suggested that since they paid for the research, they should have the right to decide what should and should not be published. But it is to the credit of Chief Scientists that they normally insist that those engaged in research should be free to publish as they wish. Indeed, in some cases contracts have included the proviso that results should be made available to the customer first, and there seem to have been few cases where final publication has been seriously delayed.

And yet the new system appears to have reduced substantially the amount of material being published by some of the laboratories now largely engaged in contract research. The reason would seem to lie in the nature of the contracts themselves. Few contractors seem to have followed the example of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, whose contracts have usually been for very large sums, and have covered substantial fields of study, so as to allow room for manoeuvre and originality. Too many contracts have been small and circumscribed by limited objectives, presenting few opportunities for research workers to make significant advances. There has consequently been little worth publishing. And in that situation, it does not matter whether or not the workers are pledged to secrecy.