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Using the scientific expertise of the House of Lords

THE idea for a House of Lords select committee on science and technology came from Lords Shackleton and Sherfield last year — shortly after the reorganisation of the House of Commons select committee structure. This reorganisation has dealt a severe blow to the interests of science and science policy in Parliament because each select committee covers the remit of a single government department. Science now comes primarily under the select committee for education and science — instead of the science and technology committee of the old structure — although topics of scientific content may also touch on the interests of other committees such as agriculture or energy.

But the education and science select committee is likely to spend more time on education than scientific matters, and none of the other departments is likely to provide a proper forum for scientific discussion of issues which embrace many departments — like biotechnology, for example. Lords Sherfield and Shackleton proposed a select committee in the House of Lords to fill the gap. Parliament and government were very badly informed on science political matters, they felt, and select committees were an invaluable way of gathering information. A House of Lords committee would also have the advantage that its members could be drawn from the many respected scientists and engineers who sit in the Lords. It should therefore be able to bring more scientific expertise to bear on key issues of science policy than its predecessor in the Commons.

The first indication of its intentions came last week, when the new committee — the 'House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology' decided on the first two subjects for its inquiries: forestry and electric vehicles. Two subcommittees are to be set up to consider them: one, under the chairmanship of Lord Sherfield, will look at the role of fundamental research in relation to British forests and woodlands; the other, under the chairmanship of Lord Gregson, will review the case for electric vehicles in the light of present energy shortages.

These subjects are intended to fulfil the criteria laid down for topics of inquiry when the select committee was first agreed: that is they should be of interdepartmental interest, and therefore fall between the interests of several Commons select committees, or they should be of insufficient relevance to any government department to be considered at all.

Forestry is a subject which might easily have come under the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food or the Department of the Environment. The House of Lords committee hopes to be able to ask questions which will be relevant to both departments and introduce an interdiscip-

linary approach.

Electric vehicles, on the other hand, might have come under the Department of Energy, but with the seemingly weightier problems of nuclear energy to consider, the House of Commons energy select committee would be unlikely to get round to the subject for a long time. The House of Lords committee may well, in this case, be looking at a worthy topic which might otherwise have been neglected — at least until its topicality had been lost.

Neither of these subjects, however, fires the greatest enthusiasm. They are hardly the most pressing of current issues of science and technology policy. Nevertheless they are both intended to be fairly short investigations: in particular, Lord Gregson's subcommittee on electric vehicles is due to start taking evidence shortly after Easter and to report in the autumn. Further plans are still tentative, although the committee has earmarked "aspects of information technology" and the role of science policy making bodies and their relationship to government as its next subjects for investigation. Specific topics within these broad subjects will have to be identified if useful inquiries are to be made. Under the second subject, for example, a look at the role of the National Research Development Corporation or the Department of Industry's requirements boards could be useful.

However, the committee should not shy away from considering highly political topics. Last week Lord Shackleton said that the committee had been asked "to avoid questions where the political component is much larger than the scientific". But the greater the political overtones of a scientific issue, the more important it is that it should be investigated by a select committee with scientific expertise.

Lord Shackleton also said that the committee would take an interest in "things that haven't been taken into account elsewhere". This could be incisive, if topics are chosen wisely; but it could also be a recipe for bumbledom, particularly if the committee allows itself to be steered away from the politically hot scientific topics.

One possibility that seems to have been ignored is that the committee should use its scientific expertise, and its ability to appoint scientific advisors, directly: why not look in technical depth at scientific issues which are in the province of the Commons committees, but cannot be covered there at sufficient length? Take the question raised by Sir Alan Cottrell recently about the feasibility of guarding pressurised water reactor pressure vessels against dangerous cracks. This is a fine scientific and serious political issue to which the Lords committee could pay profitable attention. □