The several amendments agreed by the House of Lords have not been enough to satisfy the critics. Holders of personal data stored in machine-readable form — subject to certain exemptions — would be required to register with a new Data Protection Registrar, who would keep records on the sort of information being held. (Personal data, as defined in the bill, include expressions of opinion about individuals but not indications of data users' intentions regarding those individuals.) Data subjects — subject to further exemptions — would be allowed access to information held about them and would be entitled to demand that any inaccuracies be corrected. Data users, for their part, would in general be prevented from unauthorized disclosure of personal information — again, subject to exemptions.

It is the exceptions to the general principles of the bill that arouse anger. The main concern of the British Medical Association is that computerized medical records would, if the bill became law, have to be registered, presumably by the health authorities, whose representatives — including non-medically qualified personnel — would then be empowered to pass on such records either to the police or to the Inland Revenue. The medical profession considers this quite unacceptable.

The British Medical Association (BMA) and a medical inter-professional working group on personal information have been negotiating with the Department of Health to find a solution to the problem. The department has offered some concessions based on voluntary codes that would in any case apply only while records were within its purview. BMA and the working party want medical records to be specifically exempted from the general provisions of the bill so that they could only ever be disclosed to an outside authority on the order of a crown court judge. At the same time the bill must not interfere with epidemiological research.

An earlier blanket exemption from the bill's subject access provisions and prohibitions on disclosure for data relating to immigration control has now been dropped, but it seems that the Home Secretary retains the power to exempt much government-held data from subject access "if they appear to him to be of such a nature that their confidentiality ought to be preserved". Universities are worried about the possibility of having to hand over their students' academic records on demand. And although data subjects who do manage to establish that inaccurate information about them is being held do not now have to prove damage in order to be awarded compensation, this does not apply if the data are improperly disclosed, a surprising omission picked up by Liberal Member of Parliament Mr Simon Hughes.

Quite apart from these sensitive issues, many fear that the proposed system for control of computerized personal data would be quite unworkable. The Data Protection Registrar would probably have a staff of about 20; the number of data users who would have to register would be of the order of hundreds of thousands, many of them holding entirely innocuous information. The definitions in the bill are so vague that it is unclear whether many computer systems will be required to be registered or not. The bill contains no detailed guidelines or codes of practice to help data users, and some Members of Parliament have suggested simple devices that would enable the letter of the bill to be complied with while breaking its spirit — for example, maintaining different (but unlabelled) lists for (say) creditworthy and uncreditworthy customers.

Those who defend the bill point out that as there is now no protection against the abuse of personal data in British law, the bill must at least be an improvement. But this would be to forget that once an important bill becomes law, major modifications are unlikely to be made for some years afterwards. Liberal and Social Democrat Members of Parliament who voted for the bill say they will be pressing for further changes in the committee stage. But the committee will be very limited in the expert opinion on which it will be able to call, and a Labour move to put the bill before a special standing committee was heavily defeated. However, the Home Secretary appears willing to accept that further modifications to the bill will be necessary.

Tim Beardsley

Fast reactors

Anglo-French accord at last

THE British and French electricity utilities have agreed on an outline programme of fast reactor development.

Sir Walter Marshall for the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) and M. Jean Guilhamon for Electricité de France (EDF) signed a document on Tuesday which "sets out principles for long-term cooperation" covering the joint construction of fast reactors. According to CEGB, the first such joint reactor would be built in France, while the locations of future stations have yet to be decided.

In the short term, this implies CEGB support for the building of Superphénix II, a putative successor to the 1,300 MW Superphénix I now nearing completion near Avignon. Previously, EDF has shown itself cool to the Superphénix II project because of its probable cost (about twice that of an equivalent pressurized water reactor (PWR)).

Sir Walter Marshall said on Monday that the CEGB contribution to a Superphénix II would be "neither large nor trivial", and certainly more than 16 per cent. CEGB would receive electricity and revenues in proportion.

Assuming this more advanced reactor would cost no more than 40 per cent more than an equivalent PWR, the electricity so bought by CEGB would be cheaper than electricity made by burning coal in the United Kingdom, said Sir Walter.

According to M. Guilhamon, EDF is aiming to start Superphénix II in 1986. "Breeders are easier to operate than PWRs" said Guilhamon. Breeder operators suffer less exposure to radiation, and the thermal inertia of the sodium cooling circuit offers greater protection against accident, Guilhamon claimed. The sodium is unpressurized, and normally runs at 500°C; but it must reach 1,000°C before it boils. The water in a PWR, however, is superheated. This gives a PWR a 20 minutes safety margin but a fast breeder reactor two hours, he claimed.

Sir Walter would be happy to see just one British demonstration fast reactor before 1997 (his retirement date), he said. The main constraint was not cost but the "exhausting" prospect of a public inquiry probably longer and larger than the current Sizewell inquiry into the proposed British PWR. This has been "psychologically very difficult" said Sir Walter. Sizewell must be well out of the way before another such inquiry were contemplated.

Meanwhile, further agreements between British and continental agencies are expected, following the outline inter-state agreement on fast reactor cooperation signed in January. One between the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) and its European partners is taking longer than promised — but as this shares out the research among signatories, and as research is the main component of fast reactor work at present, the delay is not surprising. A UKAEA spokesman pointed out wryly that while the CEGB–EDF agreement was between only two agencies, the research agreement involves several in a number of countries.

In fact, some years ago UKAEA had been seeking just such a bilateral agreement — but with the United States rather than France. The authority hoped that the trouble over federal support for the Clinch River project would lead the United States to fall into the arms of a British collaboration; but the US fast breeder programme was finally seen to be so confused and irretrievable that the decision was made to join in with Europe.

It may be considered significant that Sir Walter Marshall, who as the then chairman of UKAEA was behind the approach to the United States, has now also concluded a bipartisan agreement (though this time with France) as chairman of CEGB. Sir Walter approves of clarity, and it may have been against his taste to negotiate with a plethora of European agencies (as are involved in the existing European consortium behind Superphénix I).

Robert Walgate

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