

communication. Ten years have passed since a previous government promised to reform the Official Secrets Act, and seven since the present government failed to win support for what would have been a repressive amendment. Now, a new statement of policy is promised for June or July. It is to be hoped that something will materialize, and that it will betoken a commitment by the British government to the principle that official information should ordinarily be open information even when its appearance is uncomfortable. But that will not remove the difficulty about Gibraltar, where the neat (but, for the government, unwelcome) way of securing silence in advance of a public hearing is to arrange for a judicial inquiry to be held in Britain.

Give charlatans a break

Reports of astrologers at the White House will, as usual, damage the reporters.

PRESIDENT Ronald Reagan has responded with accustomed calm and dignity to the charge by Mr Donald T. Regan, published in book form earlier this week, that many of the decisions made during the presidency now moving towards its close have been influenced by astrology. There could be no more telling proof of Regan's unsuitability for the post he occupied as chief of staff at the White House than that, on some pages of his book, he should tell of President Reagan's universal kindness and, on others, fail to recognize a kindly man's unwillingness to offend even his chief of staff, when rejecting his advice, by taking refuge in what the stars foretell.

Readers of this disgruntled adviser's book will readily see that the President, when advised that he should go to Pittsburgh (for example) next Tuesday (say), would not have made the natural and cruel reply "That's a dumb idea, Don", but would instead have vaguely referred to the unfavourable conjunction of the stars and planets on the suggested day. For Regan to have failed to see this explanation without prompting is proof that he cannot have understood the job required of him at the White House.

Indeed, if Regan's account of the consultations with astrologers is to be believed, it will most probably be understood for what it is — a telling demonstration by the imaginative and radical president, who launched the federal budget deficit and the Strategic Defense Initiative, that administrative advice on what to do when should habitually be taken with a large pinch of salt. The advisers, after all, have usually no better reason for sending the president to Pittsburgh next Tuesday than the astrologers have for sending him there (or somewhere else) another day. What better way of putting the advisers in their place than by arranging for an external source of random advice on the tedious details of the presidential life? What more galling for the professional soothsayers who function as chiefs of staff than that the alternative advice should come from people liberated from the notion that questions such as when to go to Pittsburgh require rational decision?

In any case, as Regan must acknowledge, the alternative advice has worked. Nothing has gone disastrously wrong during the past eight years. Occasional episodes of acute discomfort, such as the discovery of the Irangate scandal two years ago, have not proved to be the cataclysms they might have been. Even the emergence of the United States as the most heavily indebted debtor nation has not (yet) interrupted the growth of the second-richest economy in the world. For all that mean-minded Regan knows, there could have been much more serious trouble during the past few years if the astrologers had been ignored. One of the perennial obstacles astrologers face is that the charge of charlatanry cannot be shaken off so long as they issue advice which misguided people then follow. A more charitable observer than Donald Regan, more willing to follow the example of his betters, might powerfully have helped to rehabilitate this much-maligned community whose only offence is to have managed to make mystique saleable. □

Selling nuclear power

A new government committee has drawn attention to problems in selling nuclear power stations.

SINCE the publication in February of the British government's plan for the sale of the electricity supply industry, little has been heard of the nuclear power component of that enterprise except that the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (with statutory power to regulate the safety of nuclear plants) has been issuing gloomy forecasts of the predictable end of the civil nuclear power station first planned more than 30 years ago. But now the Advisory Council on Science and Technology (ACOST) has raised the issue of what will happen after the electricity industry has been privatized (see p. 108).

ACOST itself is a new creation, less than a year old, which has plainly judged it prudent to get some kind of study completed quickly. It has embarked on and finished an examination of the future of the British nuclear power industry now that it has been decided that a proposed pressurized-water reactor station should be built at Sizewell, on the coast of Suffolk.

So far as it goes, the report of the study is down-to-earth and workmanlike. Having at last settled on a reactor design, ACOST says, the British nuclear industry had better stick with it "for many years". Having agreed that the new plant should be a foreign design (by Westinghouse of the United States), there may be some anxiety about the degree to which British funds are used to buy components and services from elsewhere, but this will be serious only if the European Communities succeed in removing "some of the energy sector trade restrictions" now extant. But there will be little effect on employment, while there is unlikely to be any obvious shortage of skilled people. In the aftermath of February's declaration that the electricity industry is to be sold, the report is necessarily somewhat archaic.

This is bad luck for which ACOST cannot be blamed. But there remain several important issues about nuclear power to be decided before the supply industry is eventually sold off. For, hitherto, British nuclear power has been a public enterprise, supported on the research and development side directly from taxes and otherwise by revenues collected from electricity consumers. There is nothing in the government's sketchy account of how privatization will be accomplished to suggest what its continuing role in the support of nuclear power will be, although it seems inevitable that it must continue to support work in radiological protection, waste disposal and safety improvements.

Both ACOST and the rumour-mills support the notion that fast-reactor development will be offered to the electricity utilities and, if not embraced, abandoned. The existing Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) has been saying that it will be generating 40 per cent of its electricity from nuclear reactors 30 years from now, but its commercial successors may sing a different tune. The long-term economic advantage of nuclear power relative to coal is that the smaller proportion of its total cost attributable to labour insulates it against the rising cost of sharing increased national prosperity, but this may not be evident to new shareholders. That is why there is a case for using a small part of the proceeds of the impending privatization to secure a tapering programme of research.

The management of nuclear projects is a different kettle of fish. ACOST has a judicious discussion of the several unsatisfactory attempts over the past two decades to build up an independent organization capable of managing nuclear contracts. The National Nuclear Corporation, the present organization, has the status of a public company which is neither capable of undertaking to build a nuclear power station for a customer such as CEGB nor as acting as an agent for the customer. ACOST says this is unsatisfactory (which is true), but that privatization must see the creation of a strong design and procurement organization. But that, surely, is for the newly privatized organizations to decide. □