

## NEWS AND VIEWS

**The Hon. Gifford Pinchot**

THE idea of conservation of natural resources is of American origin, having been formulated by the United States Forest Service so recently as 1907. The history of the development of this idea since that date, and attempts to use it as a basis for international unity and amity, is described by the Hon. Gifford Pinchot on p. 183 of this issue. Dr. Pinchot continues with a valuable proposal to utilize and develop even further this idea at the peace which will follow the present conflict. No one is better qualified than Dr. Pinchot to press these proposals, which are very worthy of consideration not only by men of science but also by all who can justifiably claim a hearing when terms of peace are up for consideration. Dr. Pinchot was a forester in the U.S. Department of Agriculture during 1898-1910. He was commissioner of forestry, Pennsylvania, during 1920-22 and governor of that State during 1923-27 and 1931-35. For a long period he held the chair of forestry in Yale University and has served on several National Commissions of Conservation. Among his publications are books on forestry and one entitled "The Fight for Conservation" (1909).

**U.S. National Defence Research Committee**

It is announced by Science Service that the following committee has been appointed in the United States to correlate "scientific research on the mechanisms and devices of warfare":

Dr. Vannevar Bush (chairman), president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, formerly dean of the faculty of engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology;

Prof. Richard C. Tolman (vice-chairman), dean of the graduate school and professor of physical chemistry and mathematical physics at the California Institute of Technology;

Dr. Irvin Stewart (secretary), formerly Federal Commissioner for Communications and chairman of the Committee on Scientific Aids to Learning;

Rear Admiral Harold G. Bowen, director of the Naval Research Laboratory, Anacostia, D.C.;

Conway P. Coe, U.S. Commissioner of Patents;

Dr. Karl T. Compton, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, formerly professor of physics at Princeton University;

Dr. James B. Conant, president, formerly professor of organic chemistry, Harvard University;

Dr. Frank B. Jewett, president of the Bell Telephone Laboratories;

Brigadier General G. V. Strong, assistant chief of staff, U.S. Army.

**Assessment of Public Opinion**

RECENT discussions in Parliament have directed critical attention to the use of 'market research' methods by the Ministry of Information for the purpose of assessing public opinion. The political aspects of the inquiries naturally loomed largest in the debate.

It is well to remember, however, that the question is not one solely of the political repercussions of applying a mature scientific procedure. The scientific basis of such work also deserves scrutiny. In at least two important respects the method is scientifically still in its early stages. First, it has not fully explored the possibilities of error which lurk in its basic tool, namely, the question. Secondly, it seldom has any reliable criterion for testing the validity of its results. The work of Muscio (following Stern and Lipmann) demonstrated so long ago as 1916 that the form in which a question is worded has an important effect on the information which it elicits. Muscio showed the importance of points which go far beyond the avoidance of what common sense and legal rulings recognize to be suggestive questions. Unaccountably, Muscio's work has not been carried further by later psychology. Still more unaccountably, no means have been devised of putting his findings to practical account in social inquiries.

Measures of public opinion could be shown to be valid if they made possible the accurate prediction of public action. But this test can seldom be applied. Occasionally the results of elections have been predicted, sometimes with striking success, sometimes with inaccuracies which are traced to the underestimation of an apparently minor factor in the situation. Moreover, public opinion is fluid, a continuous activity rather than a state; and therefore a snapshot which is accurate at a given moment may not have predictive value for public action even a short time later. The importance of this factor will depend partly upon the extent to which the topic investigated has already been canvassed by the public. To take an example from the discussion in Parliament, public opinion on B.B.C. variety programmes is relatively mature; but on the question of whether it is better to fetch our own milk cheaply or to pay a little for delivery, opinions must have been collected from people to whom the question had never before occurred and who had never discussed it among themselves. (Further, the question seems to have been asked at a time of year when the mornings are light and the weather is fine.)

In the main, this method of inquiry has established itself through the belief of business men that market surveys do give them the information that they need for their sales policies. But it has to be remembered that in market research pure inquiry is never for long dissociated from efforts at moulding opinion. It is immediately followed by extensive advertising and propaganda which, in presupposing the truth of the survey findings, may in fact make them true. In the political field the same necessity to follow inquiry by persuasion will always make it difficult to test the findings of the inquiry. The uncertainty of these methods must not be exaggerated. But it should be realized that there is scope for much improvement before they can be regarded as scientifically mature.