

CHINK IN THE FLOOD GATES

MR. RICHARD CROSSMAN, the new Leader of the House of Commons, has done much in the past week to win friends. He may yet influence people. The issue is the modernization of the ancient and archaic machinery of Parliament in the United Kingdom, and Mr. Crossman has done more than any of his predecessors in the recent past to acknowledge that something must be done to improve on the present state of affairs. It is true that he has not gone so far as to suggest ways in which Members of Parliament might be given decent facilities for doing a decent job, and it remains to be shown that sittings of the House of Commons on two mornings each week will prove more than an empty joke, but there is no doubt that his proposals to establish two select committees on science and technology and on agriculture will be valuable precedents. In the long run, they will provide the House of Commons—and also the other interested parties, particularly the Cabinet and the Civil Service—with an opportunity to learn by practical experience that detailed enquiry by a subject committee can be a valuable means of scrutinizing what the Government is doing without being an intolerable interference with orderly administration. It is particularly welcome that science and technology should be one of the first subjects to be dealt with by the House of Commons in this way.

But what should the new committee do? What questions should it ask? And how should it seek to influence policy? To begin with, at any rate, it is to be hoped that members of the committee will not attempt too much. If anybody thinks that the committee on science and technology can be used as a means of forcing policies on a reluctant government, he should be quickly disabused. And if the analogy between the committee and the public watchdog is too rigorously followed, the committee will frequently find itself frustrated by too much detail and too imperfect a sense of direction. In this sense, comparisons with other legislative committees may be misleading. The Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons has, for example, built up a splendid reputation for counting candle-ends with precision, and in that incarnation has become a fearsome institution throughout Whitehall, yet it is rightly so much concerned with uncovering the procedures by means of which past decisions were arrived at that it can only indirectly influence the forward objectives of public policy. Then the committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives in the United States most frequently function as statutory links in the machinery for approving the budgets of the several agencies of the Administration; they, too, spend a lot of time crying over spilt milk. The new committees in the House of Commons will be most valuable if they can seek to influence the formation of the principles on which new

policies are constructed. But to begin with, at least, they will have to be satisfied with an educative role. In the immediate future, the most valuable task which the committee could attempt would be to bring out into the open the whole process of forming public policy in science and technology. This, after all, is how the Commons Committee on the Nationalized Industries has made its mark.

To this end, it is particularly welcome that Mr. Crossman has it in mind that the proceedings of the committees should usually be open to the public. Although there are arguments the other way, only by such means can the committees hope to claim and to hold the attention of the outside world which the potential importance of their work deserves. The committee on science and technology should not, in practice, too frequently rush for the bolt-hole of secrecy which Mr. Crossman has allowed for in his statement. It is also to be hoped that it will gather evidence widely, and from outside the Government and its immediate connexions. There is no reason why it should not frequently provide a forum in which critics of government policy might urge heterodox arguments—or even discredit themselves.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of topics into which the committee can usefully enquire. It is, for example, several years since the British Government and several of its appendages began to talk of constructing yardsticks for deciding how to allocate money and resources to research and development: it would not be out of place to ask how they are getting on. There are questions such as what should be done with or at Harwell: how much attention should be paid to postgraduate teaching in the education of scientists at a time when administrators and some others think of it as a luxury but when university teachers and many employers know it to be an essential part of professional training; what should be done to strike a more equitable balance between civil and defence research, or at least to ensure that more civil benefits are won from the great spending on military development; whether the Government is entirely right or, alternatively, entirely wrong in trying to persuade more people to go into industry by exhortation rather than by persuading industry to make industrial life more attractive for professional scientists. Simply by asking the right questions, and persisting with them, the committee can perform a great public service.

THE NEXT ACCELERATOR

THERE will be modest rejoicing this Christmas among high-energy physicists in the United States, for now that the Congressional elections are safely over, a site has at last been chosen for the 200 GeV proton accelera-