

OLD WORLD

GAS CENTRIFUGE

All Set for Bensberg

EUROPEAN uranium enrichers in Britain, Germany and Holland are now able to point to at least one tangible sign of progress—the formal establishment of the German-based company called CENTEC at Bensberg, near Cologne, on July 29. The new company, formally known as CENTEC Gesellschaft für Centrifugentechnik mbH, will be responsible for the research and development programme which, the sponsors hope, will yield a couple of functioning pilot plants by about 1975, one in Britain and one in Holland. When the technical and economic feasibility of gas centrifuge machines for enriching uranium has been assessed, CENTEC will be empowered to design and build enrichment plants to the orders of its customers. As at present foreseen, the principal customer will be a company called URENCO, similarly sponsored by the three governments of Britain, Germany and Holland, which will be able to process and to sell enriched uranium to potential users. Theoretically, CENTEC will also be able to sell enrichment plants to countries not involved in the development programme, but obviously the sponsoring governments will be more anxious to set up as successful suppliers of enriched uranium, with the continuing profit that that will bring, than to supply outside parties with opportunities to set up in competition. URENCO has not yet been formally established, but its shareholders will be, as with CENTEC, the Dutch company Ultra-Centrifuge Nederland NV, the German company Gesellschaft für Nukleare Verfahrenstechnik mbH and British Nuclear Fuels Limited.

Those involved with the new development seem to be as optimistic now as were the three sponsoring governments when news of the possible use of gas centrifuges in uranium enrichment was first made public two years ago. By all accounts, individual centrifuge machines have been tried out separately and in cascade, with the result that the designers are confident that the machines will function. The questions to be decided chiefly concern the cost of production. Mr T. Tuohy, managing director of British Nuclear Fuels Limited and a director of CENTEC, said earlier this week that the obvious target at which to aim is the United States Atomic Energy Commission price of \$32 per ton of separated work, the equivalent of \$35 per ton delivered in Europe. He said that he and his colleagues were optimistic about the prospects—that this goal could be attained.

The chairman of the board of the new

German-based company is Dr Ir Han Hoog, recently retired as a director of Shell Petroleum Limited and its Dutch equivalent. The general manager of the new company is Mr David Peirson, secretary of the UK Atomic Energy Authority for the past sixteen years. The new company's budget is not publicly available, although it is expected that total development costs will be several million pounds. Under the arrangements which have been worked out so far, research contracts will be farmed out by CENTEC to the three shareholding companies. The result is that only the technical staff of CENTEC will be in a position to make an overall assessment of the programme of research and development.

SCIENTISTS' PAY

Calm Before the Storm

BOTH sides involved in the scientists' pay dispute are, this week, taking stock of the situation before the official arbitration tribunal sits next Thursday, August 12. The Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS) has organized a public meeting scheduled for 7.00 p.m. on August 10 at the Central Hall, Westminster, to bring to a climax its campaign that started at Abingdon three weeks ago.

These meetings have attracted large numbers of people but they have produced no visible change in the attitude of the Civil Service Department. A spokesman for the department said earlier this week that he could not comment on the strength of feeling shown at the IPCS meetings, but that the official side's case—based on the findings of the Pay Research Unit—had already been submitted to the tribunal. The unit's report has been interpreted by the government to show that a scientist within the Scientific Civil Service is as well off financially as his counterpart in industry.

The institution counters this by saying that the comparison is unfair in the sense that several of the companies included in the pay research exercise base their salaries on what the government pays scientists. It also says that the government's offer makes no allowance for the fact that the administrative grades within the Civil Service received a pay award earlier this year and so this present offer destroys the concept of internal relativity within the Civil Service.

Mr William McCall, the general secretary of the IPCS, said earlier this week that any independent body would be certain to recognize the merits of the institution's case and that he was confident that the outcome of the tribunal would be favourable to the scientists. Mr McCall also said that

if the tribunal does not produce what he expects, he will press for a review of the basis for determining scientists' salaries within the Civil Service.

Whatever the findings of the tribunal, there will be pressure to change the procedure used to determine government scientists' salaries. If there is no award, the IPCS will evidently seek to change the system. If, on the other hand, the tribunal recommends all or even part of the claim, then the whole of the pay research investigation will be invalidated. For outsiders, however, it remains a paradox that the report of this Pay Research Unit is still confidential between the Civil Service Department and the IPCS.

The question of whether the report of the Pay Research Unit should be made public was raised in the House of Commons on July 29 when the Prime Minister, Mr Edward Heath, told Mr Tam Dalyell that the decision to abide by the recommendations of the Pay Research Unit was originally made by the previous government, but that "it does not seem justifiable, when the pay is above those already working outside, that those concerned should still have increases of salary". The Prime Minister added that he would enquire into the possibility of making public the report of the Pay Research Unit.

COMPUTERS

No Breadline for ICL

THE announcement last week by Mr Frederick Corfield, Minister for Aerospace, that the British Government would continue to support International Computers Limited is certainly a shot in the arm for the company, but the decision has aroused some strong feelings among the other computer companies in Britain. These, mostly offshoots of United States corporations, naturally feel hard done by and their strongest complaint is that the minister has apparently reversed previous government policy in granting further research and development money to ICL.

ICL has always been in a privileged position in the supply of computers to government departments, and the new statement will ensure that it remains so. The company's position is determined by single tender orders which involve no competition from other manufacturers. Such preferential treatment should ensure a thriving company, but the signs are that all is not well at ICL, with 1,800 redundancies announced last week to add to the 1,600 announced earlier this year. Sir John Wall, the chairman of ICL, has said, however, that the company is in good shape and that the pessimism about the future is not well founded. Sir John also stated that the