

OLD WORLD

Select Committee Reaches the End of the Road

AT the penultimate hearing of the Select Committee on Science and Technology last week, the committee's doubts over the science policy of Britain were exposed. The select committee has for the past nine weeks been attempting to discover what that policy is, but has been unable to find an answer that satisfies it. On the Wednesday morning the select committee had before it Sir Alan Cottrell, the government's chief science adviser, Lord Jellicoe, Lord Privy Seal, and for the second time Sir William Pile, permanent secretary at the Department of Education and Science—although in the event Sir William hardly got a word in.

Sir Alan explained that there is a policy for basic science that covers the research councils, but the responsibility for departmental research lies with the various departments. The amount that they spend on research is decided vertically by examining, for example, how much is spent on transport and then spending on transport research accordingly—not by comparing transport research with, for example, fisheries research, and deciding how much to spend on each—which would be a horizontal policy. The select committee then asked if the government had goals towards which scientific research was directed. Sir Alan said it had, but was unable then to define the resultant policy except by saying it is the combination of the work done by all the departments. Mr Airey Neave retorted that “that is no answer”, and said that Sir Alan was in fact implying that there is no research and development policy for Britain. Sir Alan naturally enough denied this, saying that in his opinion research in the departments is answering the nation's needs. If all the research within the departments were taken from them and put into one horizontal policy, which crossed departmental boundaries, then, said Sir Alan, “you would make a hash of the research”.

The select committee was, however, plainly dissatisfied. It took the example of space research and said that it thought there should be a national policy for space, rather than mini-policies by each department to suit their individual needs. Sir Alan replied that the policies should be coordinated, but “to pull the space work out of the various departments and put it all into a space agency would not serve the best interests of the

nation”. Lord Jellicoe said that he agreed with the philosophy of this approach; governments do have goals which they approach through the departments, while on basic science they do have a horizontal approach.

But the committee still wanted to know who makes the long term judgments on scientific research and who decides where the priorities lie. Sir Alan replied that there is a policy for science within each department. The select committee then asked how, if there was a clash over funding for research on aerospace and on nuclear power, was that clash resolved? Sir Alan replied that it would be a decision at cabinet level, but would rest on establishing a power programme and an aerospace programme, and then settling how much of each programme goes on research.

When the committee turned its attention to the Rothschild report, Lord Jellicoe said that the government had only committed itself to the customer-contractor principle and its application to applied research and development in the research councils and government laboratories. It was also committed to a strong and viable research councils system and the continued existence of the Council for Scientific Policy or some modification of it. The committee also questioned Lord Jellicoe at some length on the wisdom of commissioning just one man—Lord Rothschild—to undertake such a far reaching inquiry. Lord Jellicoe replied that the green paper consisted of two complementary reports which meant that the problem could be examined as if

THE Select Committee on Science and Technology which has been taking evidence from witnesses for the past nine weeks on the reports of Sir Frederick Dainton and Lord Rothschild which were published in the green paper, *A Framework for Research and Development*, intends to report to the House of Commons on March 30, according to Mr Airey Neave, Chairman of the Select Committee.

Lord Jellicoe, Lord Privy Seal, said last week that the government hoped to produce its white paper on government research and development in June.

through bifocals. He said that he personally found Rothschild's prose style “rather refreshing” and pointed out that Rothschild, as a scientist, ex-chairman of the Agricultural Research Council and with experience of government, was eminently well qualified to produce the report. He admitted that the report could have been produced by the Central Policy Review Staff rather than just by Lord Rothschild, but pointed out that Lord Rothschild could have involved the CPRS if he had so wished. Lord Jellicoe vigorously denied the suggestion put to him by Dr John Cunningham that Lord Rothschild was chosen to produce the report because his views were well known to the government which wanted those views propounded. Lord Rothschild was not chosen, said Lord Jellicoe, “with malice aforethought”.

Lord Jellicoe also pointed out that there had been a great deal of controversy over the report, which he felt to be no bad thing. There had been no shortage of consultation by the government with the parties concerned, and the discussion provoked was a healthy one. Sir Alan Cottrell had received over 400 submissions on the report, and although the official period of consultation is over, Lord Jellicoe said that he would still be happy to receive people's comments.

In the afternoon the select committee turned its attention to Lord Zuckerman. The atmosphere was calmer and more measured as Lord Zuckerman said that he felt there was a need for established definitions of basic and applied science—he had in fact already offered one as long ago as 1961 in the Gibbs-Zuckerman report.

Lord Zuckerman did not think that the Council for Scientific Policy would be the right body to do the long term thinking for government research and development because it has no control over scientists within government departments. Lord Zuckerman doubted if a body with executive responsibility could be set up over the departments' heads to deal with research and development, but Lord Zuckerman implied that he was very much in favour of a central advisory body. He did not, however, favour Dainton's proposed Board of the Research Councils; it would not, said Lord Zuckerman, have the full impact which Sir Frederick Dainton envisages.