

APPOINTMENT

Astronomer Royal

SIR MARTIN RYLE, professor of radio astronomy at the University of Cambridge, is to be the next Astronomer Royal. The announcement made earlier this week will still speculation among the astronomy community in Britain about the post.

A year ago it was announced that following Sir Richard Woolley's resignation, the posts of Astronomer Royal and Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory would be considered as separate appointments. In October 1971, Professor Margaret Burbidge of the University of Southern California was appointed as Director of the RGO and now Sir Martin's appointment completes the picture.

The post of Astronomer Royal carries no emolument and is of no fixed duration. The Astronomer Royal does not by right belong to any SRC committee, although Sir Martin is already a member of the Astronomy, Space and Radio Board of the Council and is chairman of the Royal Greenwich Observatory committee.

Sir Martin will be the twelfth Astronomer Royal since John Flamsteed, the first holder of the post, was appointed in 1675. He held office until 1719 to be succeeded by Edmund Halley (1719–1742), James Bradley (1742–1762), Nathaniel Bliss (1762–1765), Nevil Maskeline (1765–1811), John Pond (1811–1835), Sir George Airy (1835–1881), Sir William Christie (1881–1910), Sir Frank Dyson (1910–1933), Sir Harold Spencer Jones (1933–1955) and Sir Richard Woolley (1956–1971).

SELECT COMMITTEE

Harwell Defended

THE Select Committee on Science and Technology last week rejected the CBI's criticisms of the Atomic Energy Authority's establishment at Harwell. The CBI, in evidence before the select committee, had said that the closure of Harwell "would make no difference whatever to industry", but the Select Committee takes the side of the Institution of Professional Civil Servants, which considers that Harwell has a useful role to play in providing research and development resources supplementary to the needs of industry.

This support for Harwell is contained in the second of the expected four reports from the select committee following its long and thorough inquiry into the management of research and development in Britain (*The Non-Reactor Research and Development Activities of the Atomic Energy Authority*, HMSO, £0.15). The first report dealt with the

research councils, was published recently and the other one on the industrial establishments of the Department of Trade and Industry and one based on the evidence given to the committee by Mr John Davies, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, are promised within the next two weeks.

In spite of the affirmation of support for the research establishments of the Atomic Energy Authority, the select committee feels that more can and should be done to increase the proportion of work which is done at these establishments on a full repayment basis. During 1971–72, £15 million of the authority's total expenditure of £67.1 million was expected to be recouped from repayments. The predictions for 1976–77, however, are that the gross expenditure will drop to £53.4 million but the amount of contracted work will increase to £25.2 million. The select committee feels, however, that this rate of increase of contracted work should be speeded up and that the authority's work should be even more closely related to the needs of industry.

The select committee sees no difficulty in increasing contractual work from the government departments but it confesses that producing a commensurate increase from industry may not be so easy. To rectify this, the select committee recommends that the authority sets up an Industrial Advisory Committee to keep matters under review.

Even though most of the Atomic Energy Authority's work is already based on the customer-contractor principle, the select committee expressed some concern about the authority's research projects classified as "development of commercial agreements". The committee suggests that these projects be "scrutinized carefully" and that the Industrial Advisory Committee examine all projects to ensure "their relevance to potential industrial needs".

Of the authority's total annual expenditure of £52 million, only £12 million is spent on the non-reactor work considered in this report. This work, which falls into two categories, applied nuclear work and non-nuclear research, is considered by the committee to be so intimately connected to the reactor work of the authority, which accounts for the remaining £40 million, that it has considered it imprudent to make any sweeping recommendations about future developments of this work before the DTI takes action on the Vinter report. This report, which has now been in the hands of ministers for several weeks and which reputedly provides information for ministers to make up their minds on the next generation of nuclear power reactors which Britain should construct, is to remain unpublished, but there seems to be no obvious reason why a decision has been delayed so long. This

delay, according to the select committee, is having a bad effect on recruitment and morale.

SOVIET SCIENCE

Russian Computers

from our Soviet Correspondent

AUTOMATIC data processing is one of the fields of research and development especially stressed in the directives of the current five year plan of the Soviet Union. By 1975, the first stage of the computerization process should be complete, with the introduction of data processing systems in almost all ministries and government departments and also in several factories.

This is planned to be the first stage of a wider scheme. Interviewed in *Pravda* (June 10, 1972), Academician V. M. Glushkov emphasized that these systems are projected as units in an ultimate Union-wide data processing and control system, which would become virtually a model of the whole economic and productive structure of the Union.

Preparations for this integrated system are already going forward. Already factory and departmental computer systems are being designed and constructed with a view to their inclusion in the final state-wide network. In the Ukraine, which has been from the beginning one of the leading areas for Soviet computer research, a network of training schools for cyberneticians has recently been inaugurated.

POST OFFICE

Great Leap Forward?

by a Special Correspondent

Martlesham, Suffolk

THE British Post Office, for long the butt of those who complain that telephone subscribers have to wait too long to be connected to the network and then find that too large a proportion of their dialled calls go astray, and still struggling to reconcile its faith in digital transmission with the old fashioned Strowger switchgear with which most telephone exchanges are still equipped, seems nevertheless to be convinced that in the 1980s it will reach the promised land. The new laboratory, to which 550 people have already been moved from Dollis Hill, once a London suburb, is agog with plans for reconstructing the trunk transmission system. Mr John Bray, the director of research at the Post Office, talks like a man who might have echoed G. D. H. Cole's comment on his first visit to the Soviet Union—"I have seen the future and it works".

The move from Dollis Hill to Suffolk