

OLD WORLD

Select Committee Renews its Battle over Computers

IN spite of recent financial aid given to International Computers Limited by the government, the Select Committee on Science and Technology is far from satisfied that the government is doing all it can to foster the industry in Britain. Earlier this week Mr Airey Neave, chairman of the select committee, introduced his committee's latest report which consists of an analysis of the progress made by the government, or should it be said lack of progress, in implementing the recommendations made by the select committee in its report on the British computer industry which was published in November 1971. (*Second Report on the UK Computer Industry (First Part)* HMSO, £0.185 and see *Nature*, **234**, 117; 1971).

The select committee is still convinced that Britain should develop a strong national computer industry whether or not closer association with computer interests in other European countries will eventually arise. According to Mr Neave, Britain should remain in the "big league" of computer manufacturers and to achieve this the government should aid the industry in Britain to the tune of £50 million per year. The government money which has already been assigned to the computer industry in Britain amounts to a little over £12 million a year for the next 3 years. Most of this money is a loan which will eventually have to be repaid. This is both unsatisfactory and inadequate according to the select committee.

In 1971 the select committee argued most persuasively for the setting up of a computer research and development board through which all government support for the industry should be channelled. The government's answer to this recommendation is the requirements board for Computers, Systems and Electronics set up last October within the Department of Trade and Industry. This the select committee also considers to be inadequate. Mr Neave emphasized on Tuesday that the board has, so far, made little impact on the major computer manufacturers although he still hoped that it would eventually carry out "a substantial part of the recommendations" made in the previous report. Mr Neave, however, does not hold out very much hope for this, for the limited character of the board is "in no doubt due in part to the government's failure to accept the committee's views on the appropriate size and method for the support of the industry."

The select committee again in this

report emphasizes that a long term policy for computing in Britain should be formulated. But it is highly unlikely that the government will accede to the committee's request. Last summer when the select committee suggested in its report on research and development that a national research and development policy be formulated the government shunned the idea (see *Nature*, **237**, 63; 1972). The British Government is firmly wedded to the idea that national policy on research and development should develop out of the policies of the individual departments and it would be most out of character if the government decided that a national policy for computers would be in order.

One of the most sensitive of the recommendations made by the select committee in 1971 was that the government policy of single tendering as a means of giving preferential support to the British industry be discontinued in favour of a block grant in-aid to the industry but the committee notes, with regret, in its present report, that the policy of single tendering still continues. "We have not heard any convincing evidence in support of the method of single tender preference which the government continues to use". This practice is bad for the industry and the user, continues the select committee, and it calls most strongly for

the minister, Mr Christopher Chataway, to reconsider.

The present report is the first of two that the select committee plans to publish on the computer industry. The second report, which Mr Neave said should be published within a few months, will concentrate on the action taken by the government in promoting international collaboration. A flavour of this report is given in the present publication where the select committee points out that whereas it commends the interest shown by the Department of Trade and Industry in ICL's future, it is perturbed by the extent of the government's direct concern with the formulation of international policy within the company. But some of the select committee's plans for the second report have been thwarted, as previously reported in *Nature* (**244**, 3; 1973), by the refusal of the commissioners of the European Economic Commission to give public evidence to a select committee of a national parliament. The refusal is probably not based on any policy for the future of the computer industry in Europe but rather on the fear that nine national parliaments would demand the rights publicly to interview the commissioners. In spite of this setback, Mr Neave said that the select committee should be visiting Brussels in September.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Accounting for a decade

EXPENDITURE on research and development in Britain in the natural and medical sciences and engineering rose from £658 million in 1961-62 to £1,082 million in 1969-70. But expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product remained constant at between 2.7 and 2.8%.

These figures emerge from a survey carried out by the Central Statistical Office which was published last week (*Research and Development Expenditure*, HMSO, £1.55). Amongst the welter of figures, which are not corrected for inflation, it is revealed that expenditure on defence research and development fell by almost half during the decade, while expenditure on the civil side rose correspondingly. In 1961-62 defence expenditure made up 1.02% of the British gross domestic product, while civil research and development expenditure accounted for

1.70%. By 1970 defence spending was reduced to 0.57%, whereas outlay on other research and development rose to 2.22%.

The government's contribution to research and development fell during the decade from 57.5% of the total in 1961 to 51.7% by 1970, the remainder being provided by public corporations, private industry, the universities (with other than money from the research councils) and overseas expenditure. During the decade the public corporations' contribution to research and development expenditure rose from 3.5% to about 4.5%, whereas private industry provided between 37 and 39% of research and development finance.

Current expenditure tended to rise faster during the 1960s than capital outlay, with capital expenditure amounting to £105 million during 1966-67 and current expenditure amounting to £797 million. In 1969-70 capital expenditure had reached £120 million, but current expenditure had increased to £946 million.