

BRITAIN

Drug firm depressant

The Labour Party last week unveiled its discussion document on state participation in Britain's pharmaceuticals industry. At least one argument adduced, concerning research, is likely to be disputed. Chris Sherwell reports

STRONG criticism of the level and direction of private sector pharmaceutical research and development in Britain, which is subsidised by the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), is contained in the Labour Party's consultative policy paper "Public Control of the Pharmaceutical Industry". The views form just one plank in the platform from which it argues that, in the public interest, the recently established National Enterprise Board should "as a matter of urgency" acquire "at least one" UK-owned company with a substantial interest in pharmaceuticals and use it as a base for expansion of the public sector within the industry. It also suggests that there should be "research-based planning agreements" between domestic and foreign companies and the national health service to determine, among other things, the amount of research undertaken in Britain.

This amounts to a considerably watered-down version of the original Labour proposals for wholesale nationalisation of the industry. Indeed, the working group compiling the document now describes these proposals as "impractical". Even in their moderated form, though, the latest proposals quickly received a blanket condemnation from Mr Michael Peretz, President of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry.

The research aspects of the argument appear to have a fairly pivotal role: as the 62-page document, which devotes a separate chapter to the subject, says, "the long run future of the pharmaceutical industry in Britain

depends on the quality and quantity of its research and development"; the UK-based industry's "greatest asset", it adds, is its group of research scientists. Labour's overall argument for public sector control does not necessarily stand or fall on the case it presents in respect of research and development, of course. But if preliminary reactions expressed last week by researchers themselves are anything to go by, the four identifiable strands of that case do not do much to strengthen the overall argument.

The first, and perhaps most important, strand argues that, while the existing system of profit control encourages research expenditure, it is "impossible to be sure" that all such activity is socially useful. The working group says it is "gravely concerned" that key areas of research can be neglected; there is, it says, "a social case for government funding of research into remedies for conditions which are obscure or occur mainly in developing countries"; it is "open to question whether a wholly profit orientated industry always fully serves a social purpose in long term research".

Only one of the directors of research at industrial and privately-financed research laboratories consulted last week expressed any sympathy with this view—and even he refused to allow himself to be less than 98% against the proposals on this count. Similarly, three professors could see little merit in the second strand, which anticipates the view that a mechanism already exists, through the research councils, for the government to sponsor research in areas where no commercial company would take the risks.

The working group says that even with the implementation of the customer-contractor principle, there has only been a "paper transfer of ongoing work"; there must be "changes of policy over research", not wasteful

duplication of administration. The danger, it says, is that "priorities will continue as before". Only one respondent tended to agree with this, and then only because he thought the MRC was "in a mess anyway". But no respondent disputed that the mechanism was indeed there.

The Labour group's objections go further, however. It points out that any long term research effort sponsored by a government department in an area of strong social need would have to be carefully planned; but, it says, this might replicate the very divorce of long term research from industry which is currently a weakness. It admits that closer links could not be better achieved by a public sector company which was commercially orientated. But, and this is the third strand, a long term research effort sponsored by a public sector company would be "more defensible for the government", and might also make it "easier to establish closer structural links" between the DHSS, the research councils and the industry. Research staff might also prefer to work in a publicly-owned where profit-maximisation was not the only force guiding their work, it argues.

These suggestions also fell on stony ground because they seemed so much a matter of opinion. Cooperation already existed, *Nature* was told, and more bureaucracy was not wanted. As for the final strand of the argument, concerning competition and duplication in research, there was no doubt that both were vital to progress, and in fact even the Labour group acknowledges the advantages without seriously challenging them.

Beyond the idea of closer cooperation between a publicly-owned sector and existing state-sponsored research the Labour group wants wide-ranging planning agreements and a "general system of indirect public accountability and control", the objective being "to change the balance of public and private power within the industry". □

USA

Explosions treaty blasted

Colin Norman reports from Washington on the controversy blowing up over the latest US-USSR nuclear agreement

IN JULY 1974, Richard Nixon, then almost engulfed by Watergate, completed one of his last Presidential acts of international statesmanship — the signing of a US-USSR bilateral agreement outlawing the testing of nuclear

weapons with yields greater than 150 kilotons. The treaty was greeted by arms control advocates in the USA with utter dismay. They regarded it as a meaningless gesture which would do little to dampen the arms race. Last month, that treaty was extended to cover so-called peaceful nuclear explosions and the reaction has been equally negative.

The Federation of American Scien-

tists (FAS), a liberal organisation whose sponsors include a galaxy of scientific stars, has condemned the joint pact as "worse than nothing". And last week, two former high ranking government officials argued that the treaty is little more than a sham which could seriously impede efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons to countries which do not now possess them. Such powerful opposition could delay, or even scuttle, ratification of the treaty by the Senate.

The 1974 agreement signed by Mr Nixon and Mr Brezhnev was not due to come into effect until March 31 this year, and it covered only weapons testing—the question of peaceful nuclear explosions was left aside for further negotiations. The treaty was soon heavily attacked on the grounds that the 150 kiloton limit is too high, that the two-year delay in implementing the pact would allow both sides to get in as much large-scale testing as they wanted, and that the exclusion of so-called peaceful explosions left a loophole large enough for either military establishment to shoot massive warheads through. Most critics urged the Administration to go back to the negotiating table and come up with an entirely new treaty.

That hasn't happened. Instead, the Administration has negotiated an agreement on peaceful nuclear explosions which essentially sets an upper limit of 150 kilotons for them as well, and which leaves the rest of the 1974 pact unchanged. Though the full text of the new treaty has not yet been released, Administration officials have said that it contains a provision allowing on-site inspection by foreign nationals for peaceful explosions which consist of several blasts whose combined yield is greater than 150 kilotons. Advance warning of such events would also have to be given.

Critics charged last week that the inclusion of the provisions covering so-called peaceful explosions in an already unacceptable treaty makes a bad situation even worse. Aside from the statement from the FAS, criticism came from Dr Herbert Scoville, former chief of research and development in the Central Intelligence Agency, and Adrian Fisher, Dean of Georgetown University Law School and former Deputy Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA). Fisher was the chief US negotiator for the historic 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty which ended atmospheric testing by all nations except France and China. Scoville and Fisher fired off their criticisms during a seminar held by the Arms Control Association.

A central complaint is that the 150 kiloton threshold is so high that it poses virtually no constraint on weapons development. Both the USSR and the USA have crammed many high-yield tests into the two-year period before the treaty was due to take effect. This has enabled the United States to develop a new warhead for the Minuteman missile, and both sides now have such a vast range of tested warheads on the shelf that there's little need to conduct further high yield tests. Moreover, weapons development in the next decade or so is likely to concentrate mostly on low-yield tac-

tical nuclear devices, testing of which would be allowed under the proposed treaty. As an arms control measure, the treaty is therefore viewed as ineffective.

In addition, both Scoville and Fisher suggested that the high limit could impede future negotiations in other areas of arms control. The usual US posture in such negotiations is to argue that limits should be determined by the ability of verification measures to ensure that no treaty violations take place. In this case, however, it is generally agreed that the United States is capable of detecting and identifying explosions in the USSR down to about 15 kilotons. (The actual detection limit is a matter of some dispute, but nobody is arguing that the limit is as high as 150 kilotons.) Thus, Scoville argued last week that "we have lost the principle of verification from our stance on arms control".

The USA and the USSR have twice agreed to seek a treaty banning all nuclear testing—that principle is embodied in the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, and in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—but since this treaty doesn't even come close to such a measure, Fisher argued last week that it could eventually torpedo the non-proliferation treaty (NPT). "It is silly to try to get other countries to sign the NPT while the nuclear powers are continuing to test and improve their own weapons", he said.

As for the provision limiting peaceful nuclear explosions, it was negotiated as a separate entity at the insistence of the USSR, which has plans for using nuclear blasts to divert rivers and for other excavation projects in Siberia. When the 1974 treaty was negotiated, the Soviet delegation wanted no limits on peaceful explosions, but the United States eventually insisted that such an agreement would leave a gaping loophole in the threshold test ban, since it would allow large-yield weapons to be tested under the guise of peaceful explosions. The United States, it should be noted, has virtually abandoned its own peaceful nuclear explosives programme.

At least the agreement now puts an upper limit on individual peaceful blasts, but it has nevertheless run into considerable opposition for treating peaceful explosions differently from weapons tests. The FAS statement, for example, notes that "this can only encourage new nuclear powers to justify bombs as intended for peaceful uses", just as India justified its detonation of a nuclear device. Fisher took the same tack: "we could end up with 20 nuclear nations all saying they are peaceful", he argued.

The FAS also regards the inclusion of provisions relating specifically to

peaceful devices as an unwelcome prop underneath the 150 kiloton limit. "The linkage between peaceful and military uses makes doubly unlikely any reduction of the 150 kiloton ceiling. After all, such reductions would now require the Russians to reduce their peaceful limit as well", the FAS argues.

One much publicised aspect of the agreement on peaceful blasts is that, for the first time, it contains a provision for on-site inspection. Though the details of what would trigger such inspection, and what it would entail, have not yet been made public, the provision has been termed a major advance in negotiations with the USSR. Thus, Dr Fred Ikle, Director of ACDA, has said that "we consider this as a real breakthrough, from the point of view of arms control, to have been able to negotiate with the Soviets detailed arrangements for on-site verification".

But not everybody agrees. The FAS statement calls on-site inspection "a precedent whose time has passed" since seismic detection methods coupled with normal intelligence gathering "have narrowed, virtually to equivalence, the tests which can be detected but not identified". A source in ACDA also noted that on-site inspection would be limited to non-military regions in the USSR; extension of the concept to arms controls agreements involving military installations is entirely another matter.

Scoville, Fisher and the FAS have all argued that, instead of ratifying this treaty, the Senate should insist that the Administration should return to the negotiation table and come back with a treaty banning all nuclear testing. In a telephone interview last week, Fisher suggested that "in a couple of years, we should be able to negotiate a comprehensive treaty. We haven't really tried so far—and that goes for past Administrations as well".

At present, it is unclear whether opposition to the treaty, which is only just beginning to emerge, will be sufficiently strong to persuade the Senate not to ratify the measure. A check last week with staff people in the offices of several key Senators indicated that so far the matter has not been given close attention, and that few formal statements will be made until the full text of the agreement on peaceful explosions is made available.

It should be noted, however, that ratification will require a two-thirds majority vote in the Senate; in 1973, 30 out of 100 Senators co-sponsored a resolution urging the Administration to negotiate a complete, rather than a threshold, treaty. Senator Kennedy, moreover, has also denounced the terms of the 1974 agreement, which have been left essentially unchanged.