

White Papers, Ministries

— AND MONKEYS : SOME THOUGHTS FOR TODAY

By EXPERIMENTER

IF a million monkeys doodled on typewriters for a million years you would probably find, somewhere among the resulting litter, most of the great works of the English language written out word perfect, even with all the stops and commas in the right places. This was the view of an eminent scientist who was illustrating the laws of probability.

If he was right it seems reasonable to assume that, also among the litter, you would discover a well-balanced and apparently well-thought-out statement on Government Assistance to Civil Aviation Research, together with a related and co-ordinated Defence White Paper. Apart from finding all the stops and commas in the right places one would almost certainly see all those hackneyed phrases, so beloved in Westminster and Whitehall, e.g. "... the Government will consider the possibility of some help on its merits and in the light of the circumstances of the case." Or "... in the light of circumstances then obtaining, the possibility of ..." Those phrases would come as easily off the monkeys' typewriters as they do off the lips of Cabinet Ministers who have no intention of being tied down to any very definite policy in the future.

In some ways one can't blame them—the Ministers—when one remembers that they may be called upon to implement a policy twelve months later which they had defined a year before when the winds that blew from the Treasury were perhaps less bitter and could still just be tempered to the shorn lamb, i.e., the aircraft industry. But, equally, one can't blame the aircraft industry if they hesitate over plans for integrating, diversifying or evaporating as requested by the Government when the Government in its turn has intimated that it doesn't quite know what it wants the industry to do or what form of assistance it will give to the industry when it does it.

The situation is, of course, perfectly clear—in a way. The industry doesn't know how many future projects, or how big a future project, it can afford to embark on and the Government doesn't know what help is needed until it knows how many and how big the future projects are likely to be. When that is decided the Treasury may say that the money is not available anyhow. On top of that, design studies of really big future projects are expensive and some doubt exists as to who should pay for them.

If a band of wise men sat round a table, working in a rather less random way than the monkeys, they would probably be able to achieve three valuable services to the country:—

- (1) They could sift through the existing pure aeronautical research work on hand and decide which bits of it are essential to keep this country in the forefront of civil aeronautical development.
- (2) They could decide which types of civil aeronautical projects we can follow with the best chance of success (e.g., all types of engines, supersonic airlines, freighters, VTOL and STOL ventures, including helicopter variants, etc.).
- (3) They could then advise the Government which of these projects needed how much money.

Some people think that the Government have such bands of wise men who have already advised in a reasonably detailed way on promising lines which should be followed. If that advice is available it would be very helpful to all concerned to have it. If it isn't available someone ought to have arranged to get it long ago.

It is possible that this most valuable advice was made available to the Minister's immediate advisers who unfortunately suffered

from a disadvantage which would not have inhibited the simian labours: the monkeys would not have had the issue confused by Treasury representations on financial expediency. But pure technical advice should not be tempered by financial considerations when it is first given. It would be of interest to us all to have the unadulterated technical advice first and then hear what the Treasury has to say, with all their doubts and troubles. This may be asking too much even in a democracy; it might even be rather lowering to the morale of the nation to hear all the Treasury's troubles; but nothing could be so lowering to the morale of the aircraft industry as the present uncertainty, which is already acting like a wet blanket on all the great and promising projects for the future.

This is not an indictment of the method this country uses for financial administration, which is probably as good as, or better than, that of any other country in the world. But it is an indictment of an unimaginative and often ill-informed financial policy against which all appeals are ignored.

The financial policy of this country during the last half century has one remarkable similarity to the road to hell. Both are paved with good intentions. The financial good intentions have often been expressed so vigorously that no vigour seemed to be left to implement them. Again and again during the last fifty years a bold stroke of well-advised financial policy could have provided some of our greatest industries with a much more prosperous and far less precarious future than they have today. A great industry dies slowly, even when it is both starved and bled; but it dies inevitably. One hopes that our aircraft industry, which now shows such great promise in the most rewarding technological field of all, will not be starved at a time when a relatively small investment can pay such enormous dividends in the future.

We hear frequently that this country is too small to compete commercially against such giants as the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. The two giants themselves repeatedly assure us of the fact. They perhaps forget that aeronautical design and development are not necessarily speeded up and made more efficient by doubling the size of design staffs; another way is sometimes to halve them, thus ensuring that those who are paid to do the thinking actually do it and don't pass the job down to a junior while they doodle distant dreams on their blotting paper. Whichever is the best way, theoretically, of achieving efficient aeronautical design, this country has shown repeatedly that it can compete with others three or more times its size. If clever design and efficient production in the aeronautical world depended on numbers only, then we could get those monkeys to work again, on drawing boards as well as on typewriters; but in fact it depends on well co-ordinated teamwork—and the emphasis is on WELL-CO-ORDINATED. This presupposes a wise co-ordinator in charge who has the education, the experience and (above all) the lack of distractions to enable him to see which way his team should go—and to push them that way.

This country still has enough of the right kind of men (the million metaphorical monkeys are more of a distraction than a help) but we must have the facilities—which means the money. We must know when it is going to be provided and how it is going to be spent. We have the wise men to tell us that—if only some people will listen to them and act on their advice.

THE GREAT CODY CONTROVERSY

EXCHANGES in the current controversy over the date of the first powered and sustained flight in Great Britain have now attained such ferocity that the bout unquestionably warrants a blow-by-blow commentary. We therefore accord this space, outside our Correspondence page, to Mr. C. H. Gibbs-Smith for a quick counter to the sharp lefts and rights delivered last week by Messrs. Geoffrey Dorman and B. J. Hurren:

Sir—After a graceful reference to my second-to-fourth-hand knowledge, Geoffrey Dorman says that my faith in *The Times* "is so naïve"; and adds reminiscently: "I remember so well how we laughed at the inaccuracy and downright wrongness of the aviation news published in the daily Press of those days." Bless me, Sir, what merry, sophisticated laughter that must have been; for intrepid pioneer Dorman was at that time (1908) a sweet leg-pulling little boy of fourteen, having been born in 1894. "Colonel Capper," continues ex-prodigy Geoffrey, "enjoyed leg-pulling, as also did Cody. They little realized that fifty years later there would be a Gibbs-Smith to swallow it all, hook, line and sinker." The Colonel must have nearly died laughing as he wrote his official report on Cody; and Cody's mirth must have nearly choked him when pulling the august and collective leg of the Aeronautical Society.

Now B. J. ("Cautionary") Hurren was less than one year old at the time; so his sage remark that "*The Times* of 1908 was one of the worst

news-papers" reveals a truly prodigious precocity; or did he later become an expert Press historian who somehow forgot to read the other reports corroborating *The Times*? He kindly says "there might be weight" to my views if I had consulted such sources as the War Office archives, the local Press, etc.; and chides me for "merely" quoting *The Times*. If Heckler Hurren—and please listen, too, Geoffrey—had had the slightest real interest in Cody, he would have actually read my brief summary in *Flight*, and asked me for the rest of the evidence: he would then have learnt that Capper's report came from the War Office archives; that the detailed *Times* reports were written by a local man; that I have more than ten contemporary sources; that the local paper *Sheldrake's Aldershot Military Gazette* supports all my other evidence up to the hilt; etc., etc.

Although our witty old gentlemen—aeronautical journalists both—won't have truck with the trivia of facts and evidence, they really should give themselves the laugh of a lifetime by reading what their own brethren said about Cody in the 1908 issues of *Aeronautics*, frivolously edited by a former secretary and president of the Aeronautical Society.

As for "Pop" Broomfield quoting my review of his own book, I still stand by the first 4½ lines of his quote and would only change the dates and distances, about which he has been so naughtily misleading.

I am, Sir, your obedient hook, line and sinker,

CHARLES H. GIBBS-SMITH.