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A New Minister . . .

TORIES used to change their Ministers of Aviation "three times a day after meals," observed Mr Ian Mikardo in a recent debate in the House of Commons. We wonder, in bidding farewell to Mr Roy Jenkins and welcoming his successor, Mr Fred Mulley, whether the hyperbole may not come to apply to the Socialists.

Mr Jenkins moves on to fresh fields at perhaps the most critical moment in the history of Britain's aircraft industry. We wish him well in his higher office, but at the same time deplore the timing of his departure. The Plowden report, which he commissioned soon after he took office, contributes little or nothing to the real decisions that it postponed. All that Mr Jenkins leaves behind, apart from an order for Phantom Speys, are three major cancelled programmes, an unreformed costing and cost-control system, and some unsettling and irrelevant political questions about State ownership.

We have no doubt that Mr Mulley, although he has no experience of aviation, is an extremely able man. We are sure that those whose vocation is aviation, and over whom he will have so much power, will extend to him the courtesies that they have extended to more of his predecessors than they care to remember. Nevertheless, the change must dismay an industry which, despite many hard knocks from the Government, had faith in the person of Mr Jenkins.

There is one bright glimmer in the gloom: Mr John Stonehouse, one of the best junior Ministers we can recall, remains in office and will preserve some continuity.

. . . And A Bigger Ministry ?

THE faster the turnover in Ministers, the greater becomes the power of bureaucracy, and the weaker the grasp of Parliament. The power of the Ministry of Aviation is already great, and yet Lord Plowden would have it greater. For example, the Ministry "should take a greater share of the responsibility for market studies." There should also be a single central organisation "with the major responsibility for promoting aircraft exports." Again, "a full-time secretariat should be appointed within the Ministry of Aviation for the Transport Aircraft Requirements Committee."

Aircraft specifications, market research and exporting are essentially commercial activities, and must be the primary responsibility of industry. A Ministry which still takes nearly half a year to prepare and publish monthly traffic figures does not seem geared to produce much useful market research. And although the Ministry has always been responsible for the Transport Aircraft Requirements Committee, it has done little to meet the criticisms of the TARC made by Estimates and Select Committees over the years. Lord Plowden's call to increase the Ministry's export expertise is welcome and is in fact already in hand; but a thousand men in a Ministry are no substitute for alert company sales engineers with an intimate knowledge of their product and the needs of the customer.

The Plowden report only superficially considers the future rôle of the Ministry; it did not, it says, "consider the subject at all deeply," merely recommending—not too helpfully—"that the Government should review it fairly soon." For the reasons we explained on September 16, we do not want to see the Ministry of Aviation dismembered. Aviation is vital to the future of this nation and it should be kept whole in Whitehall's body and mind. But we do not think that the Ministry should expand while the industry contracts.