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SCIENCE, which is now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at Business Press, Lancaster, Pa. The joint journal is published in the SCIENCE format. Entered at the Lancaster, Pa., Post Office as second class matter under the Act of 3 March 1879. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, book reviews, and illustrations, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Display-advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an address stencil label from a recent issue. Be sure to give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers, if any.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.



Meeting of Minds

A convenient property of the five problems discussed by the recent AAAS-sponsored Parliament of Science is that they all admit of much the same answer. In each case something about science needs to be increased or improved or both—its support, its organization, its communication, its students, its teachers. But this is just to recognize the present need to help science help the nation. A balancing of other considerations comes into play in deciding upon the best means to achieve these ends. And so on 15, 16, and 17 March the parliament was held. And accordingly, it proved to be a lively, if sometimes frustrating, gathering.

The question of means most hotly debated was that of defining the proper place of the Federal Government in research and education. Some participants urged increased federal aid. Others argued that responsibilities in this area belong to the state and local governments and to private agencies. But whatever position members took on this and similar matters, all were at pains to distinguish between questions of policy and questions of fact and between their roles as citizens and their roles as scientists.

To arrive at a set of recommendations, the parliament, which numbered something like 100 members, split up into five working subgroups, one for each of the problems tackled. The subgroups then reported back to the collected assembly with sets of proposals, which were discussed and put to vote. Although the parliament constituted a distinguished and representative body of scientists and thinkers, it did not claim to speak for any group other than itself. In fact, it spoke only for its own majority, for the rules of the meeting did not insist upon unanimous agreement. Among the final recommendations was one opposing the creation in the Government of a separate Department of Science and another endorsing the coordinating function of the National Science Foundation. The official report of the parliament is now in preparation and will appear in a subsequent issue of *Science*.

As a first effort at this kind of operation, the parliament experienced several difficulties. One difficulty arose from the large size of the working groups and the shortness of time. The result was that, in the interests of agreement, important details of how much, of where, and of when had to be left unspecified. Another difficulty arose from the parliament's attempt to address a very broad audience. The result was that considerable effort was devoted to saying a lot of things that most of its members would ordinarily have taken for granted. The fear was that if the parliament came out in favor of A, without mentioning B, in which it was also in favor, then some people might interpret the omission of B as the rejection of B.

How effective was the parliament in helping science help the nation? Certainly, it gave the participants an opportunity to benefit from each other's knowledge and experience. And certainly, it served as a demonstration that the scientific community, and in particular the AAAS, is much concerned about the problems of fostering and utilizing science. But any full evaluation of the impact of the parliament will have to await future developments. We shall have to see whether any of its more specific recommendations find their way into public policy, and, if so, how they work out.—J. T.