

Weekly Notes

The Ransom River

THE Transport Ministry — in common with the rest of India — has a genius for ignoring the problems of Calcutta until it is too late. It is now over 30 years since experts have been warning the Government of India of the dagger of letting the Hooghly river silt up. That the Hooghly pilots should have been trying to redress their grievances for the last 11 years is not, therefore surprising. The Ministry, following its usual tactics of fobbing off problems, has asked the pilots to withdraw their resignation, in order to create the proper climate for considering their grievances. This time, the tactics do not seem to have succeeded as the pilots are obviously determined not to give in.

The pilots complain that they have been treated in a shabby manner by the Port Commissioners. When the Bengal Pilot Service was dissolved in 1948 and re-constituted under the Port Commissioners as the Hooghly Pilots' Association, they had been promised by the then Chairman that any increase given to other marine services in the port would be given to them as well. In spite of this assurance, the scale of pay of other services was raised in 1951, while that of pilots' service was not. The pilots claim that this was a breach of agreement. The Port authorities argue, firstly, that they have no such assurance on their records and that even if such an assurance was given by the Chairman, it was in his individual capacity, and is not binding on them.

This piece of sophistry has so infuriated the pilots that they are no longer prepared to serve the Port Commissioners. They have, therefore, given the port four alternatives: (a) the pilot service may be taken over by the Government of India and administered as before 1948; (b) any other organisation be formed for administering the service; (c) the Hooghly Pilots' Association may run the service and keep in direct touch with shipping in Port Pilotage Offices; or, (d) the service may be run as a Corporation under the over-all control of

the Government of India. The main point is that the pilots want to be rid of the Port Commissioners who have acted unfairly.

The Port Commissioners also argue that since 1951 there have been two enquiries, the last of which was the Guha Roy Committee, held on what the fair scale of pay should be. Both these enquiries turned down the demand made by the pilots and, therefore on merits, the pilots have no justification for asking for an increase. Though the Port Commissioners ignore the commitment made by the Chairman in 1948 or play it down by saying that it was unofficial, it is over this that they have landed themselves in a jam. Having given an assurance to the pilots, it was obviously foolish of them not to consider their salaries in 1951 when other scales were raised. Now they find that they are not in a position to raise the pilots' scale without getting a simultaneous demand from the Harbour Masters and other marine services of the port. In order, therefore, to prevent a general increase, they have taken a stand that their prestige is involved and have made considerable propaganda that the pilots are unreasonable.

If the Port Commissioners wish to be tough, they must take risks and break the strike by allowing Harbour Masters and Dredging Surveyors who know almost as much as the pilots, to navigate down the river; or, they must make some face-saving concession within the frame-work of the alternatives suggested by the pilots. To play tough will need courage and confidence on the part of the Chairman who has only joined recently, knows nothing about ports, and would be far too afraid to take a bold step. He will, therefore, be guided by his senior Port Pilotage Officers, who are known to be sympathetic to the pilots (not unnaturally, considering that they themselves were pilots) and, therefore, will never suggest a move to break the strike. On the other hand, if a fate-saving formula is to be found, it is better to find it quickly without wasting any more time.

Commonwealth and ECM

BY fixing the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference for September, Mr Macmillan has in effect set a deadline for agreement between the U K and the 'Six' at Brussels where negotiations were resumed this Friday. If the British Prime Minister expects to be able to give his Commonwealth colleagues a reasonably clear idea of what UK's entry into the E C M would mean to them, some tentative agreement will have to be reached at Brussels by July end or early August. The Commonwealth Conference has been so timed as to bring pressure on the 'Six' to quicken their pace and also to meet the demands from Commonwealth countries that they should be consulted by Britain before any 'final' decisions are taken.

The results of the first phase of negotiations which began in November last and dragged on fitfully for over five months are set out in a progress report by the deputy leaders of the seven participating delegations. By admitting frankly the vast gap between the British and the European positions, the report gives an idea of the task that lies ahead of the Ministerial Conference just begun.

Foremost among the issues which remain to be resolved is that of the import of agricultural products from the Commonwealth into the E C M — a problem made more difficult by the lack of agreement among Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the Commonwealth countries most concerned. The negotiations also failed to bring the? problem of exports of manufactures from the developing Asian countries into the E C M any nearer solution. In face of the resolution of the 'Six' against giving up the common tariff against these imports, it has been suggested that a possible way out may be found on the lines of the Geneva Agreement on textiles. This would still leave the Commonwealth manufacturers at the mercy of the Common Market countries who would fix the quotas for particular commodities and also determine the pace at