

THE HOUSE BADLY NEEDS to pull itself together on the CIA and to get on with its inquiry into United States intelligence activities. It cannot allow its division over whether to proceed, and its confusion over how to proceed, to keep it from carrying out its plain responsibility. At best, even if it were to get quickly down to business, the House would be getting off to a late start: the Rockefeller commission's report on CIA domestic activities is already in and the Senate select committee's broad investigation of all U.S. intelligence operations and needs is months along. But the field of inquiry is vast and a conscientious House committee could still play an important role. An inquiry is also an essential means by which the House can start preparing itself to exercise the oversight over intelligence that it has never conducted adequately in the past.

The trouble in the House really began when the Speaker appointed Rep. Lucien Nedzi (D-Mich.) chairman of the select committee. For Mr. Nedzi is also chairman of the standing Armed Services CIA oversight subcommittee—one of the Congressional bodies whose past lapses had brought the select committee into being. Several critics of the CIA also were named to the select committee. Tensions were sharp from the start. When the critics learned by a leak that Mr. Nedzi in April 1974 had received and kept secret a CIA briefing on some of the very activities the select committee intended to probe, they exploded. Using regular caucus rules, they wrenched the CIA part of the investigation away from Mr. Nedzi. He then sought what was in effect a vote of confidence from the House by asking the members to accept his resignation as select committee chairman.

The House on Monday gave him the desired vote of confidence, by rejecting his resignation, by a margin of 290 to 64. Part of the vote reflected good feeling for Mr. Nedzi and irritation at the caucus procedures used by the insurgents. Another part reflected a judgment that the insurgents were charging too hard against the CIA and that the inquiry ought to be taken back from them, if not entirely shelved. It was precisely to embarrass the insurgents that the House Armed Services Committee, on Monday, suddenly interrupted nine months of somnolence and moved to rebuke one of them, Rep. Michael Harrington (D-Mass.), for his earlier leaking of confidential information on the CIA's "destabilizing" operations in Chile in 1973.

In getting the inquiry back on the track, several considerations strike us as essential. First, it is very unfair of the House to expect select committee chairman Nedzi to pass judgment on CIA oversight subcommittee chairman Nedzi. His stated wish to resign should be respected and a chairman should be named who does not have such political or ideological encumbrance. Then the House deserves to be assured that all select committee members will honor the agreed-on conditions under which classified material is given to them. That Mr. Harrington is prepared not to sit on the subcommittee dealing specifically with the CIA is a wise gesture on his part but may not go far enough. Finally, the members of the House must realize that they are being judged in three ways: against their own decision to conduct an effective intelligence inquiry, against the Senate's example of an inquiry already going on, and against the public's right to be assured that the House is competent to do its share of governing.