

Metropolitan Problems

THE first report of the South-East Economic Planning Council is called *A Strategy for the South-East* (HMSO, 15s.) and the title is the best thing about it. Much of the report is worthy, but most of it is dull. Although there is some stirring talk about the scale on which problems must be tackled, the underlying spirit is one of inaction. For all that the south-east planning council knows, the 1980s will be the same as the 1960s but more so. Faced with the demand to predict the future, the council has summoned up the natural conservatism of the English which makes it possible to embrace the notion of reform without the necessity for actual change. A part of the trouble is that the council seems to have been overawed by the solemnity of its problem. It is true that the south-east of England, which includes London, is the biggest planning problem in England, but the council seems sadly innocent of the plain truth that exactly the same problem has to be tackled by all those required to plan metropolitan areas, from Moscow to Paris. (In the United States, there are at least four such areas to be battled with.) But the council has also been handicapped by its awareness that if it did not say something—even anything—quite soon, there would be a serious danger of being overtaken by events or even of being forgotten altogether.

The nature of the metropolitan problem is now familiar. Metropolitan areas suffer from too many people, too much congestion, problems of pollution and a scarcity of chlorophyll and sunlight. In most places, people—even planners—have only just woken up to the scale of the problem. Less than five years ago, for example, the central problem of the metropolitan area around London may have seemed to be the need to preserve inviolate, or mostly inviolate, the area of administratively imposed greenery which surrounds the city roughly twenty miles from the centre. But then, quite suddenly, people woke up to the fact that the metropolitan region includes 17 million people and 10,000 square miles. Three years ago, this phenomenon was the chief marvel in the South-East Study—one of the then spate of public documents which helped the regional planning councils into being. And now there is at least a suspicion that the scale of the English metropolitan problem has outstripped the geographical terms of reference of the council which has now reported. It may be an accident that much of the natural growth in southern England in the past few years has happened to fall just outside the boundaries of the council's parish—in places such as Swindon, for example—but that is at least one reason for scrutinizing the council's present generalizations with the greatest care.

Many readers of the council's proposals will not, however, get that far. Page one of the report is so

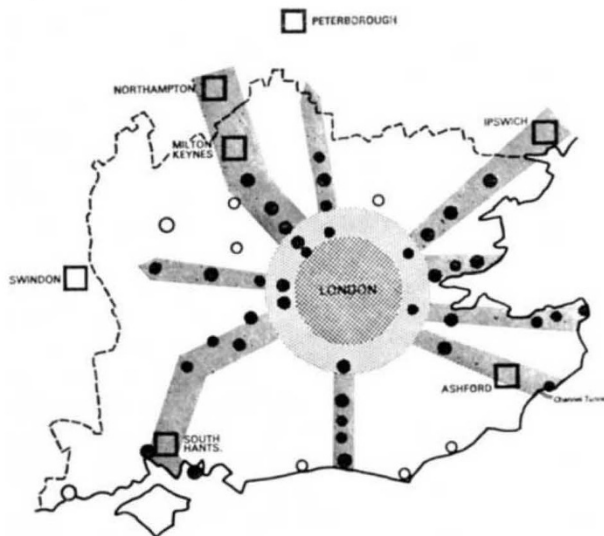
littered with begged questions that only the most trusting will penetrate beyond it without a sense of having been cheated. There is, for example, a brief passage about the virtues of London as "a unique international centre for commerce and finance, as a world-wide tourist attraction and as a centre for the arts, education, religion and science" followed by the declaration that the council will try to "enable London to work as efficiently as possible". Those who enjoy the place may be charitable enough to overlook the order in which these virtues have been spelled out, but they will find it hard to see how the council leaps from that to the doctrine that "To this end, the growth of London must be contained. Firm controls must be exercised to relieve traffic congestion, to reduce the difficulties and excessive costs of business firms and to make life as pleasant as possible for the individual Londoner . . . Continual efforts must be made to prevent unnecessary concentration of activities in London, particularly in the central area . . . We fully endorse the concept of holding the resident population of Greater London at or under 8 million . . ." And this, says the council, is why it is essential to develop "city regions around the periphery of the region". This, the council says, is "the only means we see of creating effective counter-magnets that will attract population and industry away from London". It so happens that many of the detailed proposals which the council endorses—the new city on the Solent, for example—are eminently worthy causes on any view of the character of metropolitan planning, but this is plainly an accident and not the consequence of wise design. The council seems to have based its plan on platitude.

How, for example, does the council arrive at the conclusion that the only way to deal with the problems of a metropolitan city is to persuade people to go away by creating "counter-magnets" elsewhere? For one thing, of course, this policy has been tried and found to fail in a host of different ways. For another, there is no earthly reason why people should be denied the pleasures of living in London—if they want them—simply because the council decides that the jobs they do can "reasonably and efficiently be carried out elsewhere". Are the affairs of England to be managed in such a way that the population of London consists almost exclusively of theatre-going politicians and those who assist at the Changing of the Guard? And will it be necessary for those who like sailing at the weekend to train themselves for the kind of jobs which the council has in mind for the Solent city ten or twenty years from now? These exaggerations are absurdities, as even the council would be quick to point out. It is unfortunately less obviously a falsehood to pretend that it is possible to preserve the character of a city which—

like New York or Paris to name only two others—depends for its strength and its creativeness on the unpredictable inventiveness of unsorted people. In other words, the doctrine of counter-magnets is either a dead duck or a death knell.

But what can be done about the traffic jams? These and similar questions provide the plaintive undertone for the council's report. The council's response is to attempt to solve its problems by extrapolating the present into the future, and by embracing the doctrine of counter-magnets to the metropolis. Implicitly the council seems to make the assumption that there will be no change in the character of urban life in the years ahead but only in the scale and extent of it.

This is where technology comes in. With the improvements now in prospect for the decades ahead, there is good reason to re-examine the assumptions on which the doctrine of counter-magnet cities has been based. Specifically, it would be good to know how far it may be possible to give people who live and work in satellite cities a sense that they are nevertheless a part of the metropolis. Why, for example, should not the city now certain to emerge on the Solent be deliberately linked with London by fast train services and cheap telephone circuits in such a way that it would seem no farther away than the outer suburbs of the metropolitan sprawl? The objective should be a physical communications link taking half an hour or so between the two cities—which are only 80 miles apart—and a return fare which is com-



Britain's Small Strong Voice

BRITISH politicians are fond of saying that Britain speaks with an authoritative and influential voice at the world's council tables, and there is indeed one set of deliberations in which a British voice, were it loud and clear, would be entirely welcome. In 1969 it is intended that the future shape of an international satellite network should be settled. What is the British line to be? There is a real danger that it will be hammered out on too narrow an anvil between the men from the

parable with but smaller than the price of a theatre ticket. With telecommunications, the prices should and could be such—given the capacity of modern microwave links—that the two cities could cherish the illusion of contiguity. The result could be an exciting extension of the scope of urban living. It would also help to make the south-east of England "work as efficiently as possible".

It is hard to see how the council's strategy will lead in that direction. The principal feature of the council's proposals is a pattern of radial development along ribbons stretching out in several directions around London. The intention is to confine development within the region to these narrow sectors. Even though the council insists that it does not want to see each of these sectors jammed tightly with new developments, the effect of these proposals would be to create a series of linear cities lying along the lines of the new motorways out of London. The trouble, of course, is that the success of a linear city must stand or fall by the efficiency of the transport system which serves as a backbone, and it is entirely ludicrous to expect that the roads now being built will be able to serve the purposes which the council will clearly be expecting of them twenty years or so from now. If, indeed, the council is wedded to the construction of linear cities—and there is a good case to be made for them—this is another reason why it should begin by paying some attention to the modern technology of transport.

The council should also do much more than is apparent from its report to translate its problems into the language of what is called systems engineering. To begin with, it should try to create some kinds of criteria which can be used for telling whether one pattern of urban living is more or less efficient than another. As things are, the only criterion on which everybody is agreed is that there should be a vigorous attempt to preserve as much open space as possible around London. It should then set out to define a pattern of urban life—cities, transport and telecommunications—which can give the fullest expression to objectives commonly held to be desirable. In other words, if the committee chose to do so, it could produce a design for the south-east of England that would be worth living in, and could at the same time set a new pattern in regional planning. The glitter of the prizes to be won adds to the disappointment in the council's first report.

General Post Office and the Foreign Office and then trimmed and tempered to suit the demands from the United States. That would be a great opportunity lost.

The manoeuvres in preparation for 1969 have already begun. European interests are talking about the consolidation of their ideas on the outcome they seek from the negotiations, and President Johnson has laid the first American cards on the table. His administration