

OLD WORLD

BRITISH ASSOCIATION

Thinking about Education

THE British Association for the Advancement of Science opened in Durham last Wednesday with an address by the association's president, Lord Todd of Trumpington. The burden of Lord Todd's message is that "while science and technology have been bringing about vast changes in our material existence at an ever-increasing pace we have failed to match them with appropriate social and educational changes". The symptoms of this failure are "the frustration evident among young people" and a disillusionment with science which is sharpened by concern about pollution and deterioration of the natural environment.

Such a theme, as Lord Todd himself points out, is hardly new, but his chief concern is that appropriate steps should be taken to remedy the situation, and that is why the theme bears repeated discussion from all angles. This, according to Lord Todd, "is a time to think", especially about the structure and content of the education system.

Education holds the central position in Lord Todd's thinking for a variety of reasons, but mainly because educational patterns and social attitudes go hand in hand. Until school and university curricula are taken out of the straitjacket of specialization, and until natural science is recognized "as much a branch of culture as music, literature and the arts and not in any sense a subject for the specialist alone", it will always be viewed with scepticism. There will therefore be little hope of creating a scientifically conscious democracy capable of taking rational decisions about science policy until society, through education, is made aware of the nature of science.

The place to start, according to Lord Todd, is in the secondary schools, by broadening, curricula and putting an end to early specialization. But this will have little effect as long as the virtues of traditional university education are emphasized at the expense of other types of tertiary education. One of the chief malaises of British education in Lord Todd's view is that too many students are clamouring at the doors of the universities for an education to which many of them are unsuited. It is therefore not only unrealistic but also positively damaging to suppose that the official estimates that 450,000 students will be accommodated in British universities by 1980 mean that many more students will be receiving the benefits of university education. "What a large proportion of that 450,000 ought to pursue is some other form of higher education with a different and greater vocational bias."

The trouble with regarding university education as the ultimate academic aim for which every school-child should strive, according to Lord Todd, is that university graduates ultimately end up in jobs for which their training is completely unsuitable, and they become frustrated. This frustrated white-collar class is "in part responsible for the so-called 'drift from science'". Lord Todd therefore believes that urgent thinking is required, before the debate about the future of higher education draws to a close.

COUNTRYSIDE

Boost for Linear Planning

by our Planning Correspondent

FROM the date of its nationalization (January 1, 1948) to December 31, 1968, British Railways closed 5,618 route miles (9,041 km) of railways in England and Wales. In other words, as the Countryside Commission so vividly describes in a new report, the area of railway land which has been falling into disuse each year is roughly equivalent to the land requirements of a new town of 80,000 persons (*Disused Railways in the Countryside of England and Wales*, HMSO; £1). Much of this railway land remains derelict, and only about a third of the mileage on the market between 1948-68 was actually sold (see Table 1). Obviously in a country as crowded as Britain, such land ought to be put to use again, but the disposal of disused railway lines seems to be fraught with difficulties according to Dr J. H. Appleton, who prepared the report for the Countryside Commission.

Table 1. RECENT RATES OF CLOSURE AND SALE OF RAILWAY IN ENGLAND AND WALES

	Length closed (km)	Length sold (km)	Excess of length closed over length sold (km)
1965	1,002	204	798
1966	1,209	449	761
1967	568	488	80
1968	641	528	113
1965-68	3,420	1,669	1,752

Part of the problem is that the use of railway land is limited to a large extent by its physical characteristics—its linear form, gradient, curvature and the like—and its sometimes complicated relationship with the adjacent land. A further difficulty is that, at present, while the government requires the British Railways Board to offer the land first to local planning authorities, the authorities usually decline to buy it and British Rail then offers it elsewhere to the highest bidder with the result that land is often sold piecemeal. The whole procedure, according to Dr Appleton, is complicated, often protracted, rarely integrated, and hardly in the public interest as a whole. But this land-use problem is not one, Dr Appleton says, that can be solved by a blanket decision that converts all disused railway lines into agricultural land, long-distance footpaths, bridleways or roads, however worthy these potential uses. Each stretch of railway land needs to be judged on its own merits and costed efficiently, although its disposal must also be seen in the wider context of a general land-use policy; for example, some lines might be integrated into an existing reclamation scheme.

Dr Appleton suggests therefore that the disposal of disused railway land should be taken out of the hands of British Railways and passed to some new body which could look at the matter in a wider context. Alternatively, the local planning authorities could be responsible, or even the Countryside Commission which, given more staff, could coordinate policy. Although there will continue to be conflicts of interest (particularly between agricultural and recreational uses), Dr Appleton believes they would be reduced if decisions were logical, if the public were involved, and also if they were consistent with declared land-use policy.