

to the conclusions of the Mrak Commission, published at the end of 1969. Its general conclusion was that the amounts of DDT and other pesticides now found in soil are unlikely to be removed by natural processes in the immediate future. It follows that there is no immediate prospect of a rapid decrease of the amount of these materials in the standard American diet and therefore very little chance that concentrations of pesticides in fatty tissues will quickly decline. In short, persistent pesticides are likely to persist for the next twenty years or so. What seems to be inferred from this is that while there cannot in the circumstances be an urgent need to stop the use of DDT and similar materials, this is a goal at which to aim. The weakness in the argument is that very few of the advisory committee's data have been collected from outside the United States. This in turn implies that there are at present no means of knowing what would be the condition of American soil a decade or so from now if the immoderate use of persistent pesticides which characterized the fifties were in the seventies to give way to a discriminating but potentially valuable use of a family of pesticides which is, after all, one of the most effective known. In short, here again is a field in which the Administration may act too soon and too fiercely.

Why should this be? The case of the phosphate detergents contains an explanation. For close on a decade, phosphates have been pilloried as if they were endowed with all the malevolence of the organisms of infectious disease—plague, for example. This point of view stems from the recognition that a great many lakes in North America which had been severely damaged by insupportable quantities of organic waste material were nevertheless allowed to grow algae in vast amounts because of the phosphates and nitrates contained in sewage effluents, treated or otherwise. To be sure, nobody would seriously pretend that phosphates by themselves are a sufficient cause of what is called eutrophication. But the fact that phosphates (not nitrates) are often the limiting nutrients in algal growth has given phosphates a bad name, and on the principle that honest taxpayers unwilling to pay for proper sewage treatment plants or sewerage systems may wish to salve their consciences by doing something for the common cause against pollution, there has been a great outcry against detergents which contain phosphates. Several states have already banned the sale of detergents containing phosphates. Several manufacturers have made small fortunes by marketing alternatives in the name of what they call ecology. Congress was about to gird its loins for a full-scale attack on them. Only sheepishly did the environmental high priests step in with a belated warning that the fire could easily be more uncomfortable than the frying pan.

The moral is simpler than most. In the past year, the Environmental Protection Agency has disappointed some of its wilder supporters by cultivating a proper sense of pragmatism. As things have turned out, the agency has become an empirical amalgam of those parts of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the Department of the Interior which used to worry about air and water pollution. Nobody knows how soon it will be strong enough or eager enough to take the Atomic Energy Commission by the scruff of the neck. Nobody knows how soon the Administration will give it responsibility for the Food and Drug Administration. To tell from the agency's second annual report, published a few

weeks ago, with its careful attempt to demonstrate that getting rid of pollution will cost money, the agency has determined to fight a discreet battle, keeping in the process what is called a low profile. The trouble is, of course, that such a strategy leaves the initiative to others. On this occasion, the agency has been able to divert Congress from an expensive blunder only in the nick of time. What it needs to become is a much more active agency able on occasion to say that the devil you know may be better than the devil that comes in a well-designed packet marketed by people who know that the environment is now the most popular cause of all. In other words, the agency must try to become one for saying that it may often cost very large amounts of money to win small and even imagined benefits, and that it may often be wiser to live with some minor sources of pollution than to seek to abolish them. Mr Ruckelshaus could save himself a lot of time at press conferences like that two weeks ago if he would follow such a policy.

100 Years Ago



RECENT UTTERANCES

THE Oracle has spoken. In fact several Oracles have spoken. Let us take them seriatim. From the lips of two of the most enlightened members of the Cabinet we have had at last an authoritative expression of the desirability—nay more, of the absolute necessity—of scientific education for the country at large. Addressing his constituents at Bradford on Monday the 2nd inst. in a speech to which we have already alluded, on the occasion of the opening of the new Mechanics' Institute for that town, Mr. W. E. Forster, the Minister for Education, as he ought to be styled, made use of the following emphatic language:—"The old grammar-school teaching was almost framed upon the advantage that Latin and Greek well taught gave to the boys; now, we find that the boys cannot do without the use of more general knowledge than is given by Latin and Greek; that there must be a knowledge of modern languages. But there may be also a feeling that we ought to know something of the daily facts of life, and the rudiments of Science. There, again, I speak from a sense of my own want, and I have often thought how much more useful I might have been—at any rate, how much stronger I might have been—if I had had given to me a scientific education, such as I think we may now hope that our children will attain." And again: "We now believe that we have taken measures by which we may secure elementary education to all children of all classes in our borough, and throughout the country, and, consequently, those who attend this institution will have the foundation of a training that will enable them to fulfil the original idea of its promoters," that is, "to give mechanics scientific knowledge."

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