

Alice Economics

Now that Mr Edward Heath has won his majority for the right to spend the coming year battling legislation concerned with the European Communities through the House of Commons, the recriminations are bound to be thrown thick and fast. The oddest so far is from Professor R. S. Scorer, professor of mathematics at Imperial College, London, who was complaining in *The Times* last week that the debate about British entry into the European Communities has ignored "the main issue of our time—how to control the pollution and the population explosion". He went on to say that the chief argument for membership is that it will "make the rich richer", but that "it is very dangerous to commit ourselves further to driving industry forward on those conventional lines which have brought about our predicament. . . . Member countries need to commit themselves as a matter of urgency to stopping the pollution which is rendering every sea around Europe useless in the biological cycle which is necessary for our continued existence. The rosy future in Europe seen by our leading industrialists is short-term only—it is physically impossible for it to endure."

The chief difficulty is, of course, to know whether Professor Scorer wishes to be taken seriously. What he seems to be saying is that even as things are, Europe is heading for a sticky end. If Britain joins the European Communities, as it will (Mr Harold Wilson notwithstanding), then the pace of economic growth will accelerate, the accumulation of pollution will accelerate, and the end will come sooner. This argument is false both in its premises and in its logic. Is it possible that Professor Scorer has been trying to provide the British public, and especially those parts of it which happen to read *The Times*, with a caricature of the arguments now constantly advanced by the environmentalists?

The premises are false in all kinds of amusing ways, but a list of them may help to warn off young people and other innocents. First of all, it is, as Professor Scorer no doubt wished to demonstrate, false to say that economic growth necessarily brings pollution. Indeed, in present circumstances, economic growth is probably a prerequisite for sensible measures for looking after the environment. Is it any accident that the richest nation in the world should now be the one making the most fuss about pollution? Is there anything but economic growth that will allow the people of India to get rid of pollution of the environment by the cholera organism? And if Europe wants to pay more regard to the condition of its environment, will it not be necessary to have at least enough economic growth to pay for all the extra sewage plants and government inspectors that that laudable task will require?

In Professor Scorer's little joke, the second false premise is that pollution is making the European seas "useless in the biological cycle which is necessary for our continued existence". Precisely what form of pollution he has in mind is hard to see. The beaches are more heavily polluted with flecks of oil than they have been for many years: nobody will deny that. But is there any evidence that British waters, say, have been rendered unproductive by pollution? It is true, of course, that herrings are now much harder to come by in the North Sea, but the reason for that is over-fishing. There is a risk that other species

of fish—haddock and cod, for example—will also be damaged in the same way. Salmon are also under pressure because of the new commercial fishery off the coast of Greenland. No doubt there is a great deal to be done to regulate these matters more sensibly, but law and regulations (or the lack of them) seem to be more important causes of potential trouble than pollution.

The belief that a larger European economic unit will "only help to make the rich richer" is of course an ambiguous remark—does Professor Scorer refer to people or to nations? If he has people in mind, there is a wealth of evidence to show that for a single economic unit, economic growth is one of the best ways to a greater measure of equality. If his remark had been intended seriously and had been directed to the gulf between the rich nations and the poor nations, it is hard to see how the emergence of an economically powerful European economic entity would be necessarily a bad thing. But surely what would matter is whether the European Communities would be liberal in their policies on foreign aid.

Professor Scorer's little joke would be harmless enough if it did not use some of the language which is by now widely used by those who seem to think that the world is about to end. That other mathematician, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, sought to warn his young readers away from ill-defined heresies by means of allegory, but some people think he was too obscure. Professor Scorer's letter to *The Times* may have fallen flat for the same reason, for there will be many who will think he meant it to be taken seriously.

100 Years Ago



From an obituary of Charles Babbage by Professor W. S. Jevons.

Of all Mr. Babbage's detached papers and volumes, it may be asserted that they will be found, when carefully studied, to be models of perfect logical thought and accurate expression. There is, probably, not a sentence ever penned by him in which lurked the least obscurity, confusion, or contradiction of thought. His language was clear, and lucid beyond comparison, and yet it was ever elegant, and rose at times into the most unaffected and true eloquence. We may entertain some fear that the style of scientific writing in the present day is becoming bald, careless, and even defective in philosophic accuracy. If so, the study of Mr. Babbage's writings would be the best antidote.

Let it be granted that in his life there was much to cause disappointment, and that the results of his labours, however great, are below his powers. Can we withhold our tribute of admiration to one who throughout his long life inflexibly devoted his exertions to the most lofty subjects? Some will cultivate science as an amusement, others as a source of pecuniary profit, or the means of gaining popularity. Mr. Babbage was one of those whose genius urged them against everything conducive to their immediate interests. He nobly upheld the character of a discoverer and inventor, despising any less reward than to carry out the highest conception which his mind brought forth.

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