

## Thoughts from the Tank

LORD ROTHSCHILD, head of the government's Central Planning Review Staff, delivered a serious warning to Britain in a speech to the Agricultural Research Council this week. Although the speech was billed as a preview to the Letcombe Laboratory's Open Day on "Root Function and the Soil" it is difficult to believe that Lord Rothschild was only addressing himself to those involved in scientific research. Nevertheless a train of thought now familiar to scientists dominated his speech. His main point was that unless corrective action is taken, Britain is going to slip steadily down the European economic league until by 1985, say, GNP per capita in Great Britain will be only half what it is in France and Germany. Such a slide could, in his view, only be counteracted by strong measures. We should abandon delusions of grandeur which were appropriate to Victorian times and "realise that we have neither the money nor the resources to do all those things we would like to do . . ." This was coupled fairly obviously in his speech with remarks on the difficulty during times of high unemployment of scrapping Concorde "even if that were a good idea"; or the difficulty of stopping thinking it reasonable to have four different types of nuclear reactor on the go at the same time. It was necessary that "every man and woman in the country be made aware of the dangers and difficulties ahead".

Thus Lord Rothschild added his voice to several influential ones heard recently on the subject of the decline of Britain as an economic power. The British, it is true, are prone to extraordinary fits of self-denigration, aided and abetted by the daily press, but warnings in the past year that we shall end up a nation of peasants and now this authoritative pronouncement have rather more to them than a quirk of national character.

One should say at the outset that Lord Rothschild has done a great public service by speaking out at last. There is bound to be a certain amount of tut-tutting in Whitehall over a civil servant (even if a temporary one) telling the public the conclusions of work for which the public has paid. Perhaps a healthy precedent is being set and more government experts will follow suit. The question of propriety is totally irrelevant, however, to the much broader issue of whether what has been said is true, whether it is desirable to remedy it and if so how.

It is generally agreed that Britain's growth rate is not that of other countries and it needs no more than the binomial theorem to demonstrate that we shall lag behind increasingly in the 1980s if present trends continue. And present trends can only be reversed by some dramatic action. A very serious cutback in the government's spending on symbolic items would make a lot of sense, and Concorde is a most logical target for this. There is a great danger that when Concorde has its certification and is demonstrated not to pollute as much as the environmentalists had feared (or hoped), the country will breathe a sigh of relief, mentally write off the hundreds of millions spent and declare that all's well that ends well. This is a problem that will arise repeatedly in the future—that public attention is so focused on peripheral objections

that once they have been overcome or shown groundless there is no concern left for the central issue of whether a project should have been done at all.

Lord Rothschild, however, calls for more than just fiscal caution from government in its big spending. He uses World War II analogies to urge a new spirit in the country. "In those days everyone got down to doing what the country needed him to do." Here he is on much more dangerous ground.

He is following the same path and he is likely to have as little success as did the Duke of Edinburgh with his celebrated and blunt advice some years ago. The failure of past threats of impending British decline should be sufficient warning to Lord Rothschild that there is something flowing deep in the national character which resents gratuitous advice from on high. The social divisiveness which still lingers in Britain impedes a consensus on improving productivity and any attempt to urge people to work harder is bound to create the cynicism which adds to the divisiveness. Will 5% more effort (even if possible) mean 5% more income?

Furthermore a divisive project such as Concorde which siphons off government money into faster trips for richer men can be seen as standing in the way of subsidies for more effective ground transportation which will improve the standard of living for many more people. This is undoubtedly what Lord Rothschild is all about but, bluntly, is he the best man to say these things? Our man-in-the-street wonders how his office has remained so quiet on the subject for three years suddenly to emerge threatening and advising.

Another question remains. Is an appeal (regardless of whence it comes) for help in economic growth rejected unconsciously by a large proportion of the public at present? This seems an issue of high importance as it may be a pointer to an increased reluctance in the years to come to work harder for purely economic purposes. To a certain extent, Lord Rothschild has anticipated this question by acknowledging that this is, by and large, a very nice country to live in, and thus a reasonable reaction is to wonder why there is so much fuss about economic indicators. His own reply is that lack of economic buoyancy leads to reduced capital expenditure on raising the quality of life, and there is undoubted truth in this. The problem, however, is that Britain may just be weary of industrial growth and may be saying in quite a sophisticated way that it wants out regardless of the cost. Several years ago Mr Harold Wilson was much taken with the idea that Britain should play Athens to the United States' Rome. Much has changed since then, of course, but the idea of a different type of development for different countries is one which deserves serious attention. Rather than attempting to whip up some fervour for economic growth in a country that may be on the verge of rejecting it as a national aim, Lord Rothschild might well put his and his unit's considerable abilities to work in pondering this rejection and seeing how we can live with it rather than fight it.