

Crisis leads to change

THE outlook from every capital city must at present be bleak and yet nowhere can the immediate prospects be more depressing than in London. Although the rise in the price of oil and restrictions on its supply have hit all countries and the long-term problems of price are terribly serious for developing countries, the industrialised nations are the first to feel the pinch. Britain with its natural gas and coal resources should be marginally better equipped than most other European countries to cope with oil shortages, but it has contrived to compound shortages by virtue of two industrial actions—of the coal miners and of railway engine drivers.

The miners present the bigger problem. Their action has the deeper impact on the country over the longer term and the first effects are now being seen. There is little doubt, despite the inevitable and rather silly political sparring, that coal supplies were falling to a dangerous level and electricity supplies would have been jeopardised by early February. To avoid this the government has imposed a three-day working week throughout industry. The industrial chaos that this is rapidly leading to is deemed necessary in order to maintain vital services up to the end of the winter. It is obvious that one of the purposes of the three-day week has been to prevent coal supplies being run down, as they were in 1972, to a level at which the miners could strike and get exactly what they wanted. There is considerable public sympathy for the miners, whose pay structure contains glaring anomalies.

The government meanwhile pursues its implacable course. Stage Three of its anti-inflation policy, originally heralded as offering flexibility in the negotiation process, is only three months old and seems to offer no negotiating possibilities. Unions have determined to ignore Stage Three in putting in wage claims and the situation is dead-lock—so much so that to the exasperation of the public, meetings between the sides are rare, as there is nothing to talk about. During this sleep of reason, the participants seem to have allowed themselves to be saddled with two burdens which sensible negotiators could have avoided—lack of fall-back positions and problems of serious loss of face in the event of failure.

As a result of this, whereas all countries are experiencing hardships, Britain is in danger of falling apart.

The political scene will perhaps emerge as the most damaged. For the past two or three years politicians the world over have been dismayed by the rise in world commodity prices which has taken from them much of their ability to control national economies. This in itself need not discredit the politicians provided a certain amount of frankness is maintained about what governments can and cannot do. Frankness is not, however, a mark of the British politician. Political posturing over inflation has now also become posturing over energy and the three-day week. There is a growing disbelief in the country that either major political party can be turned

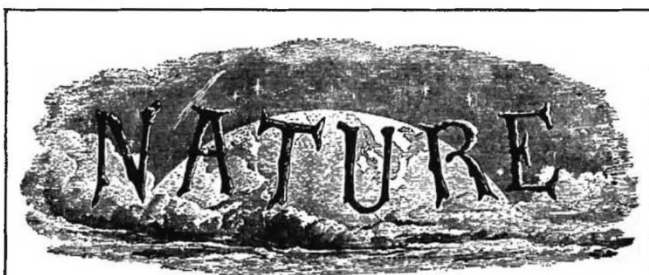
to in a crisis like this for a cool and lasting solution.

Socially, the danger signals are beginning to appear. The longer-term consequences of the present crisis—a depressed standard of living, less expenditure on desirable projects and so on—are not yet at hand but the short-term indicators, such as the way people behave, are ominous. Just as the bad economic times of the 1920s and 1930s left a mark on the personality of a generation, so the present trauma of crisis, confrontation, divisiveness and inflation may leave a scar of bad temper and distrust.

The military impact of the energy crisis for countries such as Britain lacking local oil supplies is worth comment. It does not seem likely that any such nation will be able to conduct warfare which is displeasing to oil producers without being quickly throttled. The contrast with Suez in 1956 when the retaliation was short-lived is striking. If the crisis thus simply imposed more restraints on military ventures it could be reckoned a good thing. Power to prevent, however, also implies power to promote. Only time will tell whether oil producers can dictate the military activities of other nations.

What are the prospects for science? As we report elsewhere the first impact of budget cuts is now being felt in research spending. This budget was produced before it was clear that the three-day week was a relatively long-term affair. Another month of this and further cuts in public spending may be necessitated. Customer-oriented science is probably a less attractive target for cuts than pure science. Mr Barber's razor may do some of Lord Rothschild's work.

100 years ago



THE POLLUTION OF RIVERS

The question which has to be settled is not whether anything is to be done to remedy the certainly disgraceful state of some of our streams, but rather to what extent can the purification be pushed without detriment to the industry of the district; and when this has been decided comes the next question, how this partial purification is to be effected. That it can only be a partial purification is clear from the conclusions of the Commissioners themselves, who do not propose any plan by which the water of our rivers, in populous districts at present little better than sewers, shall be so purified as to be fit for drinking purposes.

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