

Hedging & fence-sitting from the Think Tank

ONE of the prime skills of the politician is to find the right words to ensure that nothing is given away during debate. The academic politician, canniest of them all, is usually able to find the most eloquent way of keeping open all options, and even in response to the most mundane question will unearth a convoluted answer. "Will all the delegates be coming in to dinner?" the Master of a Cambridge college was asked recently. "Some . . . but perhaps by no means all" was his reply. The Think Tank's latest offering, *Energy Conservation* (HMSO, £1.00) is replete with such generalised High Table fence-sitting.

The Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) set itself—at least nowhere is there any indication that the idea sprang from elsewhere—the task of producing a document for public discussion on how energy conservation might be achieved. A broad interpretation was put on the words 'energy conservation' and the CPRS included an analysis of methods of using replenishable forms of energy as a means of conserving fossil-fuel-generated energy. We reported last week the outlines of the report. What concerns us here is whether the CPRS does a good job when venturing into such fields and whether energy conservation is an appropriate matter for the CPRS to study in any case.

The most striking feature of the report to a scientist is the utter lack of any substantiating material for all that is said. In the report's 64 pages it roams widely over material as varied as domestic insulation and energy from sea waves. The authors (anonymous, of course) have clearly done a lot of reading and presumably have also been to see many of the scientists and technologists whose work forms the basis of the report's conclusions. Yet nowhere is there a single reference to published work, nor to a conversation with anyone. As a result it is extraordinarily difficult for this document to be a vehicle for public discussion. Beautifully manicured paragraphs that would have delighted Gowers for their style and clarity are no substitute for well documented arguments.

Consider, for instance, the Severn barrage scheme. It is described and dismissed in two paragraphs. "Significant environmental benefits are claimed by proponents [here follows a list of benefits] . . . They are not, however, easy to substantiate and would not appear to transform an apparently uneconomic project into an economic one . . . The long term ecological effects are very uncertain." This may be an elegant way of covering a lot of ground but it leaves the reader with too many unanswered questions—who are the proponents, why are the benefits not easy to substantiate, who is concerned with long term ecology? Or again in discussing energy storage schemes, ". . . nevertheless, the widening

differential between nuclear and fossil fuel costs in favour of the former may prove sufficient to make at least some of these schemes economic." Some, but perhaps by no means all.

The central question, however, is whether the CPRS should be doing this sort of study at all. There are various spurious arguments that can be raised against its involvement, such as that the staff cannot possibly be technically qualified or that the subject is more properly a departmental matter. If a Think Tank is a good thing, and we believe it to be so, then it must certainly be allowed to do what it wants and to risk offending the specialist departments. What it must not do, for its own sake, let alone that of taxpayers, is to bite off more than it can chew. This it has palpably done in this case.

Not only is the subject of energy conservation colossal in extent, but the CPRS has expanded it even more by discussing the economy of the inexhaustible resources. With such a wide field it is almost inevitable that there will be no incisive thinking, since the staff, desiring to be comprehensive, can have had little time to develop expertise in individual areas. The overall impression that the report gives is of diligent reading—and there has been ample material to read in the last year—but no very profound thinking. The document bears no marks of being the subject of intensive discussions amongst the staff; indeed it seems instead the sort of thing that an academic might produce during a sabbatical year. This, surely, is not what the Think Tank should be all about. If, in the future, the CPRS does not want to get a reputation amongst scientists for vapid thinking it will have to concentrate its attention much more.

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If anyone wants to see how lamentable is the absence of practical work in the examination system of the University of London, let him get "Questions in Chemistry and Natural Philosophy given at the Matriculation Examination of the University of London from the year 1864 to June 1873, classified according to the syllabus of subjects," by C. J. Woodward, B.Sc. (Simpkin, Marshall, & Co.) We say nothing against the book itself, which is a creditable compilation of its kind, but the system capable of giving birth to such a text-book must be an unmitigated encouragement to "Cram."

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