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Manpower needs are not so easily estimated

IN A DOCUMENT put about by the Manpower Services Commission of the Department of Employment, the claim is made, amongst others, that in the off-shore oil industry 'immediate and continuing shortages of geologists, petroleum engineers, drillers and divers have been established'. The circumstances surrounding the report—*The discovery of off-shore oil and gas: manpower implications*—are such there must be the gravest doubts that it merits the extensive publicity it has so far received.

The commission, about which you will learn nothing at all on any page (or the cover) of the report—not even its address, telephone number or where it fits into ministerial structure, sponsored Mr David Begg of Nuffield College, Oxford to write a report which could be an overview of manpower implications of the discovery and exploitation of off-shore gas and oil. Mr Begg took only a couple of months over the draft and has now left to do postgraduate research in the United States. Subsequently Mr John Fyfe, of the commission's secretariat, 'up-dated, revised and expanded' the draft, but in publishing it (at least I suppose it's published although it has 'confidential' on the front page) the commission made the odd statement that the views were those of the authors and not necessarily those of the commission. It is mystifying to know why a report is being disseminated for 'interest and assistance' if the commission cannot stand behind it.

Mr Begg seems to have consulted and drawn extensively from about ten more specialised studies in his overview; it is unclear, however, how many people in the industry he spoke to. The result, as one critic put it, is an A+ for the college essay prize but no marks for producing a document of any help to policymakers in deciding what, if anything, should be done by government, industry and educational authorities.

The authors draw heavily on figures from the Petroleum Industry Training Board (PITB), also a Department of Employment agency. PITB forecasts for oil-related employment are based on a projected number of mobile drilling rigs which, the authors admit, was demonstrably in error as early as June 1974. These errors may partly spring from the nature of a multinational, ever-changing industry in which are all sorts of service companies which do not report operations and employment figures to the board. To go on to accept PITB projections on employment merely with the comment that they should be

treated as conservative estimates is a poor substitute for the detailed investigative work that is needed.

As it is, the report, echoing the PITB, sees the number of jobs for geologists/geophysicists rising from 440 in 1973 to 520 (misprinted as 570) in 1980; for petroleum from 190 to 330 in the same period, and for divers from 300 in 1974 to 650 in the late 1970s.

Can skilled men be provided in sufficient numbers? The report, supposedly aimed at this question, never really answers it at all. Amongst geologists, for instance, what evidence is there that there is a shortfall on the 200 that the PITB say can be employed at present? Or that there will be a shortfall on the 220 that could be used in 1980? None at all, and the authors never address the problem, instead tut-tutting that university geology courses are unsuited to the demands of petroleum geology. If the authors instead of rushing into print had chosen to talk to some of the major oil companies, they would have found that the companies run extensive training courses and prefer the unpre-doctrinated graduate. They would also have found that the companies are acquiring geology graduates without difficulty in what one executive described as a buyer's market. And yet the report speaks of having 'established' an immediate and continuing shortage of geologists.

A similarly critical analysis could probably be applied in the other professions. There seems to be an all-too-ready desire to call any differential between present and future needs a shortfall without a serious examination of ways in which the oil industry is likely to respond. And since the industry is multinational, professionals that can't be found in Britain will probably be imported.

In the case of deep-sea diving, where skills will undoubtedly be in demand for many years, the authors choose to use the emotive turn of phrase rather than careful study. Perhaps 'inadequate training and a high fatality rate' is a correct summing-up of the scene, but what confidence can one have that this undocumented charge is anything more than much else in the report—hunch and hearsay?

It may well be true that there will be shortages of skills in the North Sea, but it would be dangerous to base any plan of action on the evidence of this report. The ability of the British government to monitor what is happening under its own nose must be brought into the most serious doubt by this document. □