

have been howls of protest if the anti-trust suit against IBM had not also been dropped last week.) So for AT&T the future has the air of being an unaccustomed gamble, but a good one.

The chances are that it will succeed, and that the consequences will be profound, not merely in the United States. First, the emerging public telephone system in the United States will be an invaluable economic model for suggesting how such enterprises can be run on commercial lines. Nowhere else is such a task attempted. United States users of the telephone will most immediately discover that it costs them more to use the local telephone service as if it were unmetered water. Further ahead, however, they will find their habits changing, and telephones will be used increasingly for what they are best suited for in present circumstances — long-distance communications. It will be interesting to see how long telecommunications authorities elsewhere will be able to pretend this model is irrelevant to them.

The liberation of AT&T from the regulatory framework will also help to change the character of telecommunications. For several years it has been clear that technical innovation has outstripped the capital resources of the industry (and the capacity of potential consumers to buy its products). The result is that people who read in the technical literature of novel kinds of office switchboards, facsimile transmission by satellite, electronic mail of various kinds and high-density communications channels, have to put up with the much more rudimentary means of communication already in service. Competition from AT&T should help to bring down the prices at which these novel services are sold. More important, the entry of even a truncated AT&T into such fields should help to speed the exploitation of existing innovations as well as to sustain the pace of discovery.

But why all the bother? Can it really be of such great importance that people who have not yet learned to use pocket-size computers should be more able to install computer terminals in their living rooms? Or that people in Europe should be able to watch American television (and vice versa)? There is a widespread and unhealthy scepticism prompting these and other questions. The common underlying fallacy is to ignore the present importance of the telecommunications industry and to dismiss as unimportant the potential growth. Yet if the industrialized world wishes seriously to find something with which to occupy itself in the decades ahead, can it afford this insouciance?

## How to save a university

*The University of London is in danger of collapsing. It needs a recipe for survival.*

For a quarter of a century, and in spite of a succession of supposed reforms, it has been clear that the University of London could not continue as it had become. The question now is whether it can survive. The request by University College, the university's largest college, to be supported directly by the University Grants Committee and not through the university's own bureaucracy (see page 88) is not intended as a threat to the continued existence of the federal structure. But that is what the effect will be. If University College gets its way, others — the London School of Economics, for example — will want the same, and will not easily be denied. And even though separate financing does not of itself mean separation, what would be left of the university's central administration would be even less able than at present to give the university a sense of coherence.

How, it will be said elsewhere, have the mighty fallen. Within living memory, the University of London was not merely the largest single university in the United Kingdom and the largest source of qualified physicians (which it still is) but a godfather to emerging universities in Britain and elsewhere in the British Commonwealth. The university was then an important source of academic qualifications (by means of its external degrees) for those studying on their own while, almost as a sideshow, it administered school-level examinations in most Commonwealth countries, old and new. In its heyday, the university was

imaginative and flexible, setting up a number of internationally important postgraduate institutions. Although always a federation in the sense of being the umbrella beneath which several constitutionally autonomous educational establishments agreed to function, the university appeared as a unified academic institution because its examinations and degree systems were administered centrally. Under the pressure of disparate events, most of these activities have been shed. The emergent universities have emerged, and no longer need an avuncular guiding hand. Countries once eager for London's services as a school-level examiner increasingly prefer to look after themselves. The demand for external degree examinations fell away as access to universities became easier in the 1960s. And, for more than a decade now, the university had delegated to its constituent parts much of the responsibility for setting their own degree examinations, largely in recognition that any common system must inhibit the pursuit of excellence by the stronger colleges. At the centre of the university is now to be found little but an office.

The past year has shown how vulnerable is an entity like this. The federation has become so loose that its vice-chancellor at the time (Lord Annan) was less able than his colleagues elsewhere to protest convincingly at the British government's decree that overseas students' fees must be increased (in 1979) and at the proposed cut in university budgets. Lord Annan did his eloquent best, but since last summer his successor, Professor Randolph Quirk, has had little choice but to hope against hope that the plans for retrenchment at individual colleges will somehow add up to compliance with the instructions of the grants committee for the university as a whole. (The obviously necessary survey of the scale of teaching in various subject areas, put in hand last September, will nevertheless probably come too late to provide individual colleges with timely guidance.) The university has promised to put redundant academics on a central register, and has asked colleges about to hire staff to think first of people being put out of work elsewhere within the university. So far, however, there is little prospect that the university will be able to put together an academic plan for the years ahead. The committee set up to do just that, under Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, has been pre-empted by events. And if a plan should emerge by accident from the work of the subject review committees, the chances are meagre that this would be adopted by the university's senate.

It will, however, be tragic if the university simply withers away because it has no way of deciding what to do or how to do it. But time is so short that almost any plan will be better than none. So it is that it falls to the vice-chancellor to do off his own bat what the university's maze of committees cannot accomplish, and to say what the future will be like. A few simplifying assumptions will help. First, University College (bigger than many other British universities) is, like Imperial College, big enough to look after itself but should pay for its financial independence with unbreakable promises of help for the smaller fry. It is absurd, for example, that research facilities remain as jealously protected as they are, or that colleges wishing to provide specialized teaching must usually provide it for themselves. Second, the London School of Economics merits a similar degree of independence by its success in recruiting students from overseas.

Third, the vice-chancellor's chief concern should be with the rest of the university — seven or eight smaller colleges and a host of postgraduate institutes. The past few months have shown clearly that even willing partners in schemes for collaboration are given pause by the stark truth that collaboration cannot preserve jobs at all the institutions concerned, and may also hurt the academic pride of many of the teaching departments. The moral is that there should be an academic plan for these smaller components of the University of London that will, in due course, make collaboration between them natural and relatively painless. Any plan would enable these small but distinctive parts of the university to know where they are likely to be standing some years from now. No plan is a recipe for the further erosion of the university — or even for an agreement among the rump that it too would like collective independence. In that case, there would be nothing left.