

A Broader Debate on Energy

WITH the sudden attention that energy and its wise use is receiving world-wide, it was appropriate that the Royal Society should have convened a meeting to discuss 'Energy in the 1980s' last week. By an amusing coincidence, it started on the day the advertising signs were extinguished in Piccadilly Circus. There was more to our interest in the meeting, however, than simply the (fulfilled) expectation of adding to our knowledge in the field. If scientists and technologists are to speak to the public beyond their own community in a manner that will stimulate discussion and understanding, form is every bit as important as content, so we were particularly interested in the shape that the meeting would take. Two weeks ago *Nature* reported unfavourably on an energy meeting convened by the Royal Society of Canada (246, 56; 1973) largely on the grounds of its conventional format; could this one produce something new?

That it did not was no discredit to Sir Peter Kent who had assembled a distinguished list of speakers. Relevance, however, increases greatly with the proximity of the threat, and since the meeting had been announced, the question had changed dramatically from being what will we have in the 1980s to what will we make do with in 1974. One by one specialists discussed dispassionately their particular interests and supplied a multitude of data but the projections into the 1980s were cautious and assumed a relatively undisturbed society and no surprises, pleasant or otherwise. What was needed to complement these strands was a shuttle to weave cross threads and put the story together according to different patterns. What happens to the projections when oil supplies are cut by 10% in 1973? If the nuclear programme falters how are the other resources strained? If several as yet underdeveloped countries with large populations suddenly acquired an appetite for energy how would projections be affected? (We are, after all, at present seeing the consequences in the world food situation of the growing appetites of developing countries for protein.) And perhaps the key question—is energy saving, either voluntary or compulsory, going to make any impact on energy needs? It may be that what meetings of this sort need is the stimulus of a longish paper which has been read by everyone previously and which is sufficiently provocative that experts can spend their time dismembering and rebuilding rather than pursuing independent paths. Certainly some sort of interlocutor would be a useful addition.

As it happened, the lack of a feel for total situations at the meeting was balanced by the simultaneous launching (surely no accident) of a document by the Friends of the Earth. This booklet, 'World Energy Strategies' by Amory Lovins, is worth reading if only because the author does attempt a synthesis. He works from the hypothesis that a "resource inventory would by itself be useless . . . energy constraints are not mainly dictated by physical scarcity, but are geopolitical, environmental and socio-technical".

Mr Lovins sees coal as the short and medium term solution to the energy problem. On the way to this conclusion, he comes up with some fairly predictable views

on the need for constraint in energy usage, particularly in the United States, some caustic words on the safety risks of nuclear fission and some hopeful thoughts on coal. He concludes that "the problems of coal are substantial but can be solved" whereas "governments should suspend their nuclear programmes until enough infallible people can be found to operate them for the next few hundred thousand years". This is an outspoken and biased point of view. Mr Lovins is prepared to give coal the benefit of every doubt, nuclear energy the benefit of none. Nuclear energy has to be judged not only by technical standards but by ethical considerations, whereas coal, the pursuit of which mars thousands annually but which lacks the magical ability to afflict unborn generations, is let off the social hook with a naïve reference to a recently opened Illinois deep mine which "is said to use every kind of safety and health precaution yet still is profitable." We are not the first to point Mr Lovins to Otto Frisch's delightful essay 'On the feasibility of coal-driven power stations'.

Nonetheless, Mr Lovins is a great asset and should not be lightly dismissed. For too long, discussion of broad multidisciplinary issues in the United Kingdom has been subordinated to the pursuit of excellence in individual fields. Decision making has been regarded as so much a province of government that national discussions of policy issues have been sadly lacking. For all that we may disagree with the Mr Lovinses, we need them in order to open up the debate. Preferably we need them on the same platforms as the experts and certainly we need them to make a nuisance of themselves.

100 Years Ago



A HEALTHY HOUSE

What a House should be, versus Death in the House. By William Bardwell, Architect and Sanitary Engineer, (London: Dean and Son.)

It would be interesting to have had some references given to sanction our author in claiming the authority of the Duke of Wellington, together with that of Aaron and the High Priests, his successors, for the practice of placing their beds nearly north and south so as to be in the line of the magnetic current. The theory no doubt has its advocates, but can hardly be of universal application, as there are many sound sleepers at all degrees of orientation.

From *Nature*, 9, 60, 61, November 27, 1873.