

THE DRIFT OF POPULATION

By A. J. Carter



IT IS JOBS that attract men, and lack of jobs that compels them to move elsewhere. Migration from a depressed area in turn leads to a further running down of the economy of that area. Men and jobs go together; employment and the distribution of population must therefore be considered together. In the light of the drift of population to the South-East the inadequacy of the regional approach to the problem becomes very clear.

"Between 1951 and 1961," said *The Guardian* (April 2, 1963), "there were 750,000 new jobs in the London region—nearly half the new jobs in the whole of England and Wales. Of these jobs 300,000 were in new office buildings, 96 per cent of them within the built-up conurbation of London."

The Government's belated response to this was the typically negative action of restricting office building in London, on which one firm of estate agents commented: "You won't see houses being built up on commercial sites . . . all that will happen is that commercial site owners will sit back and wait, secure in the knowledge that restrictions can only inflate office prices in the long run."

The exact proposal was to amend the third schedule of the Town and Country Planning Act so as to prevent developers from exercising their present right to rebuild an office with up to ten per cent more cubic capacity than the old building—a figure which astute developers can turn into as much as forty per cent in square footage. This is in direct conflict with the principle of the Offices Bill which is designed to ensure more space (though still precious little) to each office worker.

If people could be attracted away from the London area as now they are attracted to it, the demand for office accommodation would soon begin to decline and falling prices and profits would then check the supply. This result would be achieved naturally as the necessary corollary of a positive policy and not by legal restrictions, imposed, one must suspect, as little more than a sop to public emotion.

Allied to the control of office building is the establishment of the Location of Offices Bureau to give advice about decentralisation. Here again it can be seen that the prime objective should be to woo away people, for the activities of the Bureau, useful as they may be in themselves, will not help the main problem as long as the city building vacated by a firm moving out is re-occupied by another firm moving in.

The Government also plans for the building of a minimum of 500,000 new houses over ten years in the London area. Once more, is it not more important to attract people away from the South-East than to adopt measures that may encourage them to stay? If these houses can be built and there is a demand for them, why is it that the Government has to plan their existence? If the Government eventually succeeded in its proper aim of reversing the population drift, and acted to end the artificial land shortage which stifles building of new houses, there would be no need for it to take a special part in the provision of housing, which is mainly the task of private enterprise.

According to an article by Mr. Anthony Goss, head of Leeds School of Town Planning (*FBI Review*, January 1963) twenty million people will be living in south-east England by the year 2000 if the drift of population continues at the present rate. Said Mr. Goss:

"At the root of this movement is the changing pattern of British industry. In 1907, about sixty per cent of the insured population in manufacturing industry were living in four main areas—South Wales, the north-east coast, Lancashire and mid-Scotland. The older industries were closely associated with the coalfields, iron-ore deposits and ports. But new developments in power (electricity and the national grid), and changes in goods transport (from goods train to lorry) freed the newer industries—especially engineering, chemicals and vehicles—from these locations. The new industries, "footloose" but market oriented, established themselves around London and Birmingham, and so began the present-day gravitational pull of the London-Birmingham axis . . .

"Yet, while geographical factors played an important part in the original location of industry, such factors have tended to play a much diminished role in the development of many of the newer industries of the twentieth century."

This being so, the novice might have expected any alert government with the requisite powers to have stemmed the drift, but in spite of some successes, "the efforts to push industry back towards the North have been like swimming against the tide." "The essence of the position is 'imbalance' between the 'unfavoured' regions of the North and the 'favoured' regions of the Midlands and South-East. This imbalance is being accentuated at present, despite all

that is being done by the Board of Trade.

"The problem needs tackling from a number of angles simultaneously. Alongside the renewal of the centres of northern cities, providing improved cultural, educational and entertainment facilities, there should be a drive to improve communications in the north of England and Scotland, with motorways and good road surfaces linking the cities and the northern ports. Greater priority needs to be placed on clearing the vast areas of nineteenth century housing. Some of this can be done by more new towns and perhaps new, small satellite villages and the expansion of the smaller towns. But a great deal of housing renewal in the cities will also be necessary."

This is a valuable assessment, although it must in fairness be stated that (naturally enough, considering his profession) Mr. Goss advocated "national and regional planning" to put things right. This is a principle to which I am opposed, since I believe that, subject to certain minimum planning requirements, the optimum use of land could in the right circumstances be secured by the operation of the free market, which, *prima facie*, is preferable to State control.

If the North were as attractive as the South—attractive to live in and attractive to work in—the increasing concentration of population in London and the South-East, which rightly gives rise to so much anxiety, would not take place; in fact, now that the drift to the South-East has become so pronounced, one would expect a turn of the tide in the opposite direction as people revolted from their crowded conditions and sought healthier lives elsewhere. Yet at present, although everyone wants to live in Surrey or Middlesex, who wants to live in Liverpool or Newcastle? The towns of the North are notorious for smoke, grime, antiquated housing and ugly factories which are legacies of the Industrial Revolution. They are, in a word, underdeveloped.

Nor is it only the towns that need cleaning up. In an address to the annual conference of the Royal Institute of British Architects held in July 1963, the then city architect of Sheffield, Mr. J. Lewis Womersley, referred to "the complete change of scene" experienced by a northbound traveller after he reaches Nottingham:

"The green meadows, clean rivers, and unspoiled landscape change to a landscape pitted with colliery waste-heaps, disused pit-head works, derelict factories, belching chimneys, and industrial waste littered not over acres but over square miles; the very air is ten shades darker. It is, let us face it, much like going from heaven to hell . . . The North, of course, is not all squalor. Close to some of the slag-heaps lie beautiful hills and woods."

Mr. Womersley went on to say:

"In the contrast of the blemished beauty of the North with the cancerous congestion of the South-East lies the key to our problem. It is surely by making the industrial North more attractive to live and work in that we can check the drift to, and ease the congestion of, the South-East."

It is significant that the political and economic editor of *The Sunday Times*, Mr. William Rees-Mogg, whose concern was with employment rather than with population, made the very same point about the backwardness of the North (*Focus*, February 21, 1963):

"The essence of the unemployment problem of the North is this: the regions of high unemployment are also the regions in greatest need of a reconstruction of their social capital. Where the South reflects the building of the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s, much of the North and of Scotland was built in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s to the standards then thought good enough for artisans. The roads, bridges and ports, the houses, schools and hospitals, the city centres and the hotels of the North all require massive redevelopment."

Mr. Rees-Mogg goes on to advocate an intensive programme of public works, which of course entails increased government spending. The disadvantages of this policy will be discussed later. The diagnosis, however, is excellent, and it becomes clear that the combined problem of unemployment and excessive population drift can best be solved by bringing the North up to date, and so making it pleasant to live and work there. In deciding how best this should be done, we must first consider why, in the second half of the twentieth century, the towns of the North still seem to be trailing in the nineteenth.

The reason for this can be indicated by taking the analogy of general economic recovery after the second world war. The victorious nations were theoretically in a much more advantageous position than those defeated, but in fact it is in Germany and Japan that the most spectacular post-war recovery has taken place. It seems that mass destruction—a clean sweep, as it were—is in the long run economically beneficial, for when the old is swept away there is a powerful impetus to work for reconstruction, and all development is brand new. Plant and machinery has to be built quickly, and it is the most up-to-date and efficient of its kind. An intensive modernisation takes place which soon forces the country concerned not only back into the running but ahead of victor countries which have had such a better start. Does it follow that a reasonably rapid modernisation can take place only after the cataclysm of war? That would be a gloomy doctrine indeed if it were true.

Modernisation should be a continuous process. To go through decades of stagnation and then try to catch up all at once is not what would happen in a smoothly functioning society. There is a natural incentive for industrialists to renew or replace their machinery frequently, as there is for developers to renew or replace buildings—provided, however, that there is both a competitive atmosphere, without any form of protection, and a taxation system that does not penalise improvement. Britain is lagging behind because there are fundamental obstacles to modernisation and therefore efficiency, and these in turn have affected the attitude of management. This is the basic reason for the under-development of the north of England.

Scotland also needs city redevelopment, for in spite of an improvement in the employment situation after a £7 million Swedish shipping order, over fifty people are leaving Scotland every day. "A single large contract can ease unemployment on Clydeside", wrote Susan Cooper in "Revolt of the Regions" (*The Sunday Times Weekly Review*, September 22, 1963) "... but it can no more check the annual 20,000 depopulation of Scotland than Canute could stop the North Sea." Part of this depopulation is due directly to absentee land ownership: land where once men earned their living in independent crofts is now in the possession of aristocrats or insurance companies.

The Government is partly aware of the need for modernisation and development, and last November published two White Papers: *The North-East—A Programme for Regional Development and Growth* (Cmnd 2206) and *Central Scotland—A Programme for Development and Growth* (Cmnd 2188). The principal theme of both papers is the increase in public service investment of from £55 million in 1962-3 to £90 million in 1964-5 in the North-East, and from £100 million in 1962-3 to £140 million in 1964-5 in central Scotland. (It is expected that for some years afterwards these amounts will continue to rise.) The general arguments for using public spending to cure unemployment will be considered later, but in the meantime there are three main criticisms to be made of the Government's proposals.

The first is that they deal with effects and not causes. The Government is carrying out a rescue operation and has enlarged the scale of that operation, but no attempt has been made to find out why the North-East and central Scotland need to be rescued. Greater thought about the causes of the underdevelopment and obsolescence which the Government is trying to relieve would have led to the conclusion that only radical changes in the structure of the economy will enable a healthy balance in the distribution of population and employment to be restored.



The second criticism, which largely follows from the first, is the immense emphasis on action by the Government. The Government, to its credit, does mention that its own efforts are not necessarily the most important, but one cannot fail to be struck, when reading the substance of these White Papers, by the fact that government planning and influence permeates so many aspects of life. If the only choice were between continuing unemployment and depopulation on the one hand and extensive government intervention on the other, then such intervention might be justified, but there is a third way out, and that is to remove the obstacles that deter the people

themselves from acting to improve their environment.

The third criticism is that the proposals in the two White Papers stem from a regional rather than a national approach. It is not right to single out certain regions, however depressed they may be, and give them help that is denied to the remainder of the country. It is no more right to create "development regions" than it is to create development districts, and it is significant that one of the first attacks on the plan for central Scotland was that it should have included other parts of Scotland too.

The regional approach leads to discrimination. The North-East has 5½ per cent of the population of Britain, and in 1962-3 received 5½ per cent of national public investment. As a result of the Government's measures, this proportion has risen to 6½ per cent for 1963-4 and will rise to 7 per cent for 1964-5. Central Scotland, which has 7½ per cent of the population, already enjoyed 10 per cent of national public investment in 1962-3, and this will rise to over 11 per cent for 1964-5. The White Paper on central Scotland itself admitted that there would be "some measure of discrimination."

There is even discrimination within the regions themselves. In the North-East the programme is concentrated on a "growth zone" and in central Scotland on "growth areas" and "major growth areas." The whole of the growth zone consists of development districts (several having been specially created), and no section of it will cease to be a development district until the whole region has recovered. It is thus possible for a part of the growth zone to become relatively prosperous but still to qualify for government assistance while areas in other parts of the country or even elsewhere in the North-East, though less prosperous, are unhelped.

The only way to avoid discrimination is to make the whole region a growth zone (which is presumably impracticable) and every single region in the country a "development region" (which is absurd). We should then be back where we started, for the Government does not create economic growth but merely alters its direction, and there would be no point in enriching one part of the "growth nation" at the expense of another part!

The policies contained in the White Papers—and there may be more such Papers for other regions—are more imaginative than the Government's previous policies, but they contain many of the same mistakes. This is not to say that there are not measures among the Government's proposals that are worth while in themselves, nor to deny that the general aim of economic development is a far better one than that of merely "creating employment" in the narrow sense, but the Government has not yet discovered that there are methods of achieving its objective which bring in their train not evils but further benefits.

DEFINITION

Politics: The art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing the wrong cause and applying unsuitable remedies.