

Rich is a Four-Letter Word

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“THOSE who fight for a purpose not readily valued in money are met by the question ‘Is it worth it?’ By asking the wrong question, a materialist society ensures that it will not have achievements which match its resources. I would like to see economists, therefore,

kept in their place, but in that place honoured as competent professionals. The richer a country becomes, the less need it has to be ruled by economic thinking Perhaps if the economist is seen as a technician rather than a main pillar of society he may win the

esteem which is given to the humble, competent dentist.”

Charles Carter, Vice-Chancellor of Lancaster University, is concerned to avoid our being “mastered by our own affluence.” His book* is therefore not at all about the production of wealth, nor even about the distribution of wealth, but rather about the effect which an apparently limitless ability to create wealth has on the society which possesses it. Once material well-being has been adequately secured, what enjoyments do we have? How can we say that material progress advances the cause of civilization, when all around there is abundant evidence of degrading self-indulgence?

On the way to these larger observations, the author entertains us with cautionary advice on the fallibility of figures (“an excess of facts, even if they are completely accurate and up to date, can be as inhibiting to decisions as a deficiency”); deals generally with the standard wealth indicators (such as gross national product and per capita income) and their shortcomings; discourses on the relativity of poverty (“satisfaction is, to some extent, a state of not having need to feel envy”) and on the artificial stimulation of wants (“perhaps the process of want-creation without genuine satisfaction can be seen most clearly at work in the commercialism of the British Christmas”); and notes the stratification of society and the importance of status in the eyes of the community (however high the dole might be, “it is degrading (in the exact sense of that word) to have no work”).

So far, so good - but a Vice-Chancellor who is also a joint editor of the *Economic Journal* must offer more than a collation of reflections, and, accordingly, the final chapter is entitled “Implications for Policy”. Earlier, we indulgently let pass statements such as “the greatest of all economic imperatives is the provision of full employment”, or that the fundamental British economic problem is the balance of payments dilemma and stop-go policies. Now, however, we have to be more careful when told that “the freedom to be influenced to buy a branded drug, instead of an equivalent in the British Pharmacopoeia at a quarter of the price, is not worth fighting

for.” On the contrary, the freedom to make one’s own mistakes is a basic one. Lancaster’s Vice-Chancellor, however, would have us determine a subsistence level for ourselves, which “might turn out to be at or somewhat above the level of social security benefits. It then becomes possible to calculate what excess exists . . . and to direct attention to the ways in which this excess is used and ought to be used As long as a substantial public sector of spending exists, there is really no alternative to engaging in rational thought about the pattern of the total use of resources.”

If you have swallowed all this, you may now wash it down with a heady cup of long-term planning - the real thing, over twenty years. “The appropriate technique is the rolling plan, revised each year (and extended for an additional year) in the light of the latest estimates. . . . The rolling plan provides a possibility of orderly convergence to the truth, as knowledge increases and the incorrect elements of information are put right.”

The author is plainly no power-mad visionary, and he would probably be the first to be appalled at what would happen to his ideas once they had been converted into political policies by the twin types who would converge on them (the arid and calculating, and the glib and woolly.) In fact the writer’s motives are respectable enough, for he clearly points out the failure of accumulations of short-term ex-

pedients, and he is concerned to underline the lack of forward thinking about the use of the world’s resources and the damage to what we prosaically call the environment.

If his sense of proportion has gone astray in devoting so many pages to where and how to curb advertising, his humanity returns triumphantly at the end of a discussion on the costing of amenities: “Wise and experienced men sometimes get a bad reputation with the young, because their pronouncements lack exactitude. This, however, may be a sign of their wisdom rather than their senility A man does not usually decide to marry a wife solely because of her dowry, or her vital statistics; other factors, of a type distinctly difficult to quantify, enter in.”

In the end, he himself admits

that what he has produced is “an odd mixture of vague hopes and precise proposals”, and he hopes for “a saner appreciation of Wealth” and “a change of attitudes which will then inform both public policy and individual action.”

Early in his book, in commenting on a quotation from John Stuart Mill, the author has written: “Wealth is everything which has a power of purchasing - that is to say, money, and all things exchangeable for money or for other things. The free gifts of nature, such as air, do not form a part of wealth”. Land is a free gift of nature, and, though exchangeable for money or other things, is not wealth in the economic sense. The author was so near to seizing on this distinction that one’s disappointment with his closing chapter is tempered by the hope that he will return to that early point and perhaps begin again some aspects of his analysis from there.