

In praise of prophets

Next week, the British public will be on the receiving end of more warnings and admonishment from the Professor of Biology at Stanford University, Paul Ehrlich (see p 634), who is due in the country to appear on a late-night television programme. Ehrlich's periodic visitations are a curious phenomenon. The last time he hit the headlines here was in autumn, 1969, when he swept into London and forecast worldwide plague, thermonuclear war, overwhelming pollution, ecological catastrophe, and the virtual collapse of Britain by the end of the century. "If current trends continue", he said at a crowded meeting held by the Institute of Biology, "by the year 2000 the United Kingdom will simply be a small group of impoverished islands, inhabited by some 70 million hungry people, of little or no concern to the other 5-7 billion inhabitants of a sick world."

The audience loved it and gasped for more. For an hour they listened, enraptured, to dire warnings about the death of all sea-food, a drastic fall in imports, international tensions, and "rocketing" death rates. "If I were a gambler", Professor Ehrlich concluded before boarding his plane, "I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000." He then flew off into the night, leaving behind yards of exciting headlines, a clutch of memorable phrases ("siren song of the myopic optimists", "tidal wave sweeping the country", "political turmoil will rule" . . .), and the gratitude of editors who had used Ehrlich to keep the pot boiling between the Liberal and Labour party conferences.

What are we to make of such passionate denunciations? One view was eloquently expressed by John Maddox at the Swansea meeting of the British Association. Maddox believes that because man is intelligent and adaptable, and because we have, by using scientific and political skills, coped with some terrible problems in the past, we shall continue to cope in the future and do not need the prophets of doom to harangue us into concern and action. Indeed, Maddox argued, the exhortations of the doom-mongers may well be counter-productive, de-sensitising us into complacency by crying wolf too often and diverting attention from really important matters.

There is something in this interpretation. How many of

Ehrlich's audience in 1969 really took his message to heart? How many accepted the intellectual catharsis more in the spirit of a Gordonstounian cold shower—something to thoroughly enjoy feeling slightly uncomfortable about? Most important, did Ehrlich spoil his case by overstatement?

If Ehrlich is guilty in this way, it is probably on small matters, not his central arguments. At the Institute of Biology meeting, for example, he warned that a mutant influenza virus could decimate mankind. That is true, and it is most unfortunate, and we must press on with the development of vaccines and antiviral drugs to combat such a virus if and when it emerges. But this danger has little if anything to do with human stupidity or the misuse of science. Ehrlich also claimed that ecological breakdown could easily lead to diseases such as plague, typhus, cholera, and malaria becoming predominant once again, and that plague could cause "the collapse of British society" and "horrors worse than the Black Death". But surely, no conceivable ecological changes in a developed country such as Britain could produce conditions in which rats, fleas, lice, mosquitoes and faulty water supplies could carry these infections?

And yet. . . Ehrlich must be right to warn, with all the means at his disposal, of the massive global problems—above all those of pollution and food supply—which have concerned him in recent years. The very scale of these problems, the escalating rate of change, the uncertainties and controversies even among experts who are supposed to know, make it foolhardy to accept comforting reassurance that the Naked Ape will continue to cope with problems as he has in the past. The great virtue of prophets like Paul Ehrlich (why don't we have any home-bred ones?) is that, in throwing their energies into promoting a cause, they scavenge, digest, and deploy every possible scrap of information that will support their case. The end result is that a powerful case is presented to us all as citizens, and exposed to the criticism of the scientific community. Socially, democratically, scientifically, that is a vitally important activity.

Bernard Dixon

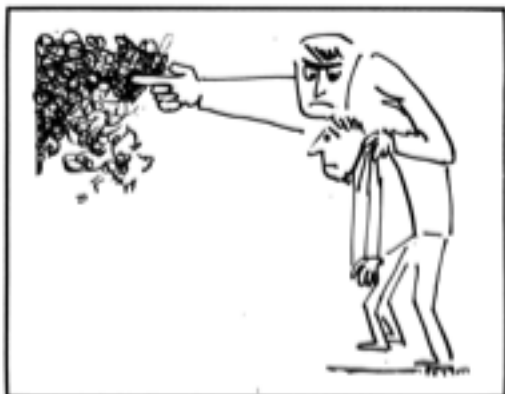
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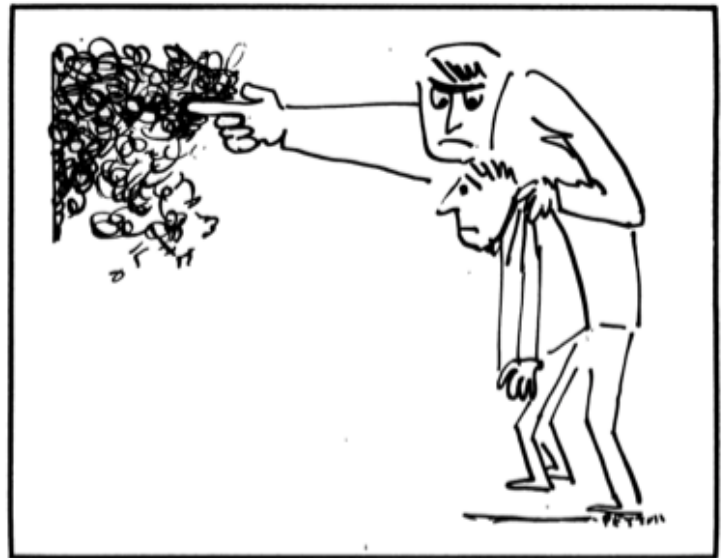
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