

The Biggest Computer Fraud

Editorial

It is easy to gain the impression that it is the declining industries which are the most ravenous in their desire for taxpayers' money. But this would be a false impression. Readers who have braved the jargon-infested pages of the computer press will know that those intrepid souls working on the frontiers of technology take second place to no one when it comes to getting a snout in the public trough.

A combination of technocrats and the educational establishment in the UK have lobbied so effectively that the government has decided to fund the *Alvey Programme* to the tune of £350 million. The *Alvey Programme*, for those who don't know, is a series of projects aimed to produce fifth generation systems. If you don't know what fifth generation systems are then relax - no one else is too sure either. All that matters is that UK software academics are once more walking tall. They maintain that Britain leads the world (hurrah!) in artificial intelligence following the announcement of the Flagship system, *Alvey's* biggest project so far and worth 16 million smackers (*Computer Talk*, Dec. 16th).

By now the alarm bells will be ringing in some quarters. The Pharaohs of Egypt built pyramids, and the mediaeval church favoured cathedrals, when they wished to consume conspicuously. Modern governments, nationalised and quasi-nationalised industries have found a present-day equivalent in expensive, high-risk, prestige projects. Just as the Egyptian slaves and the mediaeval serfs funded their masters' extravagance, it is poor Joe Public who invariably picks up the bill for the grandiose follies of today.

And there have been *so many* of them: Concorde - Britain must not be 'left behind' in supersonic flight, even if no one wants to fly supersonic; the Nimrod early warning radar, already hopelessly behind schedule

and even more hopelessly overspent; the System X telephone switching system which just won't sell; the fiasco over the fast-breeder reactor; the Plessey Ptarmigan battlefield system which even Thatcher's special pleading with Reagan could not convince the Americans to buy in place of a more modest French system, half the price. It may be that pyramids and cathedrals are finally proving to be of use to those holiday-makers who want their yearly 'fix' of history. But can anyone really imagine that the tourists of tomorrow will want to stand in front of rusty old fifth generation systems which no one could be bothered to buy.

It is even doubtful if the government's policy of putting micro-computers in schools throughout the country has been an unqualified success. Certainly Acorn and Sinclair, two computer companies, would not have landed in so much trouble if the government had not suddenly expanded, then contracted the market. Nor can we yet be sure that the desire to increase the number of computer-boffins has resulted in more than the production of children who would win the world computer games championship for Britain. If it has produced the required result, why is there such shortage of computer staff at present?

For patriots there may be a crumb of comfort in all this. The redoubtable Japanese seem to have had a severe attack of this particular British illness. Bored with capturing the major markets of the world and dispirited by their supposed lack of inventiveness, the Japanese have decided to spend six billion dollars on their own fifth generation schemes. This raises therefore two possibilities. If spending money on grandiose schemes can deliver the goods, then the Japanese, who are spending far more, are clearly going to deliver them first. We can then buy the fifth generation systems from them if they prove to be useful. The Japanese have never in the past been reluctant to sell their goods to us - even when we have tried to stop them. If, however, spending money on grandiose schemes is just money down the drain, and most of the evidence favours this view, then the Japanese are going to lose a lot of money. In neither case is there any

reason why the British Government should follow the Japanese in a spending spree.

Seven 'Sins' of the US LP

John Karr

In its statement of purpose the Libertarian Alliance is excessively critical of the American Libertarian movement's decision to spend much of its energy on a political party. Here for the readers is my rundown of the seven sins committed by the American Libertarian Party.

(1) The first woman to receive an electoral vote for vice president. Tonie Nathan, the party's first ever candidate for vice president received one electoral vote, one third as many as Geraldine Ferraro. (The president and vice president are not elected by direct popular vote. Voters vote for electors, who vote for the president. There are 538 electors.)

(2) The 1980 presidential ticket received one million votes on an undiluted libertarian platform. I am not sure that many people in England have even heard of Libertarianism.

(3) Through successful campaigns, such as Ed Clark's, Americans are more aware of Libertarianism than any other nation in the world.

(4) Spreading the message through non-election means. Reportedly, the Vermont chapter's newsletter circulates something on the order of 10,000 copies an issue. How many more people are there in England and how many fewer of them have ever seen a *Free Life*?

(5) The Libertarian party is now the third largest party in the country, with permanent ballot status in two thirds of the states.

(6) The party spends too much time on ideology. People are generally more interested in your views on important issues than why you hold them. Until they are interested in you they won't seriously listen to your reasons. The party has finally realised that it needs a separate manifesto,

which the voluminous platform has now become, and a shorter list of key issues and positions taken in turn from that.

(7) Offering American voters a genuine choice. Both major parties are dominated by opportunists. Neither party has much to offer a consistent Libertarian. When a voter pulls the lever labelled "Libertarian", they know what they are voting for.

There are those who still say that it cannot succeed. Perhaps the American LP will never elect a president, but it can influence the other parties. If the party can on a regular basis receive at least 5% in major elections, it will be taken very seriously. The party has done this and can repeat it regularly. While most Americans are not Libertarians, few are Socialists. A recent survey by *Fortune* magazine found that more than half of young executives were more libertarian in their views than conservative or liberal. The US is naturally more fertile ground for Libertarianism than probably anywhere else, something the critics do not take into account.

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Reply to John Karr

Although the discussion of the American Libertarian Party was only a small part of our leaflet *Purpose and Strategy of the Libertarian Alliance*, we thank John Karr for enumerating the 'sins' of the ALP as he sees them and trust that our answers will be the beginning of his road to repentance.

(1) The point here presumably is that the electoral vote for Nathan was good because she was a woman. But John Karr does not tell us what was its effect on Libertarianism. If it only succeeded in attracting the attention of those people who think that it is meritorious in itself that women achieve positions of power then it would have been better if the vote had gone to a one-legged chimpanzee. These are no doubt the same people who would cheer if women move into positions of power in the Politburo.

(2) and (3) We may be wrong, but from foggy Britain it seemed that the Clark campaign was not quite so uncompromising

The Libertarian Alliance is an independent, non-party group, with a shared desire to work for a free society.

as John Karr makes out. In any case, the necessity for Libertarians in Britain is the recruiting of people who are willing to work for Libertarianism. week in, week out. We simply do not believe that many of the people who are willing to cast their vote once every four years are willing to make this commitment. Where were these one million voters when the demands for protectionism were rising to fever pitch this year in the US?

(4) Please would John Karr refer us to the place in our leaflet on strategy where it states that we are against spreading the message by non-election means? It is difficult to make much sense of the third sentence.

There were (mid-1982) approx 46,799,000 people in England. We have not thought it worthwhile to employ *GALLUP* to tell us how many of these have not seen *Free Life*. We can however, be sure the number is considerable. There are equally legions of people in the Soviet Union who have not read Marx, but this does not preclude his work from having some influence there.

(5) If this means that the revolution is just around the corner then we are pleased to register our approval.

(6) At first glance this point looks like gibberish - and mature reflection only serves to confirm the fact. Does John Karr mean that it is a sin to spend time on ideology or not? In our opinion the people worth cultivating are precisely those who are interested in your views and demand to know the reasons why you hold them. Those people who are 'personality dependent' and are unable to separate opinions from the people who hold them should be shunned like the plague. The idea should not be propagated that Libertarianism is just a pretty face, good for a short run on Broadway.

(7) Whether American Libertarians should decide to run their own party, or seek to influence the Democrats and Republicans, or pursue some other strategy, is a decision which can only be made by the people on the spot. If American Libertarians feel it is correct to commit the - inevitably - vast resources and effort to running a political

party effectively, they must take the decisions and bear the responsibilities. For better or for worse, this option is not available in the United Kingdom.

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