

A MEASURE OF OUR WORTH



WHAT are you worth? This isn't a flippant question. It is the key to some of the most important issues that will hang over the rest of this century.

Your first answer to my question is likely to be personal; couched in terms of what you think you might mean to those closest to you. That is the real sense of worth, and I don't wish to know it. But move beyond that, and you begin to get on shaky ground.

Those in paid work can quote the wage they receive. It's a poor measure of real worth, but it's a start. Those out of work know that the price level you put yourself on when you are in work collapses once you are out of work. It's a buyer's market; people are ten a penny. There is no mileage in the wage you used to get. All that matters is how much less you will work for now. This is at the heart of the government's 'Competitiveness' policy. The logic of it is roughly this:

Workers in Britain have been paid too much and produced too little. They are inefficient. Our competitors can produce the same goods more effectively (and cheaply). Free trade will therefore give customers a better choice, and force workers to accept more realistic (ie: lower) wages. In this new and openly competitive environment Britain will learn to grow and prosper by sharpening up its ideas, becoming more efficient and concentrating on a hi-tech future.

If you've been nodding so far, you're in for a bitter disappointment. Just ask yourself the following. Why should hi-tech jobs remain here when there are equally qualified people in poorer countries who would do the same work for a fraction of the price? How can people without jobs buy the goods they used to produce, when they don't even have the cash to pay the lower asking price? How can you boost consumer confidence when the fear of unemployment is no more than the next cheque away?

These are no longer just factory floor issues. They affect everyone with a job (or dreams of one) and they require us to face up to two of the biggest heresies of our time — that free trade is a good thing (which will create jobs), and that becoming more efficient secures the jobs you are in. That was what was said to the miners. And the miners broke all productivity records. And the government told them we had too much coal, and miners still weren't competitive... and they shut the pits. You can't compete with the price of coal produced by child labour. And it's not just heavy industry where this applies.

Law firms in New York can fax draft letters to unknown women workers in data processing firms in Barbados, cheaper than they can get it done by the secretary in their own room.

The data processing of the last UK census was done in India because highly qualified computer programmers there earn less than £2,000 a year.

Firms such as British Telecom, Nat West Bank, London Transport, the Abbey National and Procter and Gamble are all, directly or indirectly, using Indian computer programming. But even they are under threat from data processors in the Philippines who work for 60p an hour, plus free health care (and

extra rice if they don't miss a day's work!) There are firms of accountants in the UK who now ship work across to the Philippines for processing because the costs are cheap and the profits enormous.

It doesn't create wealth, but it is a wonderful way of concentrating the ownership of it Can you compete with 60p and hour? Could you feed the lads on it? Pay the heating? Meet the mortgage or rent costs? Run the car? Live? This is why we must look again at world trade.

The World Bank produced a report in 1992 which showed that the largest 350 transnational companies controlled 40% of all world trade. They write the rules, rig the markets and rake in the profits. It matters not one jot whether the production is in Bolton, Buenos Aires or Bangkok. All that counts is that you sell enough to satisfy your shareholders. And that is where the world is going to have to begin if it wants a more sensible economics.

We have to begin to say "you can sell here if you site here". Move wherever you like... but don't then expect to sell your goods here. We need tax rules which favour the small company rather than the multinational and which bring in charges for playing on the speculative money markets. We need rules which require that the majority of monies held in pension funds, banks and insurance companies are invested in the areas where they have been generated. We need to refo-cus our thinking about economics to make sustainable development the centrepiece, with local and regional trade networks having priority over the global aspirations of global giants.

If we did this, then we would soon discover that other elements came as part of the same package. We would have an agenda for jobs and an agenda for the environment We would understand the difference between investing for tomorrow and stealing from today. We would discover the answer to the question: "What are you worth?"