

The brain trust returns

In medicine memories tend to be short. Old clinical descriptions periodically re-emerge as new observations, things tried in the past resurface as original inventions and even the great pioneers are forgotten within a generation. How many can still remember who discovered the intravenous needle or performed the first cholecystectomy?

In politics the lessons of the past are also quickly forgotten, and yearnings for socialism revive as memories of the Berlin Wall recede into oblivion. A common point of view, recently articulated in these columns (17 July, p 207), is that socialism is not dead nor should it be—if for no other reason than to keep the masses from starting revolutions. Seventy years of Soviet socialism were a mere accidental detour, and so were many other recent political experiments. In Washington new Democrats, acting like old Democrats have raised taxes and will bring prosperity to us by making the rich pay and ending trickle down economics. A new era has arrived, and the place is swarming with visionaries, egalitarians, liberal democrats, and “experts” who want to refashion the world closer to their heart’s desire.

Much of this, however, has happened before. In 1934, in *New Deal No 1* H L Mencken described how France, having

recovered from the Napoleonic wars, was doing so well that by 1845 it had become the envy of Europe. Then a recession struck, the workers lost their jobs, and “people began preaching a novel gospel called socialism lately invented by a man named Karl Marx.” Everybody blamed the greedy rich, they sent packing their “immensely stupid but immensely respectable king” and installed a “brain trust” composed of political and economic advanced thinkers, gifted proletarian metaphysicians, and even a celebrated poet.

Overnight these talented men abolished capitalism “ordained that the old inequality between man and woman should cease,” confiscated the properties of the rich, and drove them into bankruptcy or out of the country. As jobs became scarcer and unemployment rose, they began to build public factories and undertake open air public works on an enormous scale, dredging rivers, digging canals, and building railways in all directions. But the more they dreamed and built and dredged the more of a mess they made, and nothing ever seemed to work out right. So the economy went from bad to worse and unemployment kept on rising until there were riots in the streets. At last the brain trust was turned out and Louis Napoleon became president of France.

Then “the rotten rich began to creep back, the closed factories began to reopen, and there began to be jobs again.” Eventually the brain trust disappeared as mysteriously as it had come together, concludes Mencken, and nothing was ever heard again of “the smart and saucy fellows who undertook to overthrow the capitalistic system, redistribute wealth, abolish poverty, find a job for everyone, and bring in the New Jerusalem.”

All this sounds discouraging, but is worth bringing up as Congress readies itself to work on the health care reform plan assembled by a massive brain trust of 400 experts. Such exercises in government planning have all too often been characterised by faulty thinking, inefficient execution, waste and group loafing, stifling regulation and proliferating bureaucracy. Will we again repeat the errors of the past?—GEORGE DUNFAS, attending physician Cook County Hospital, Chicago

