

doesn't allow its old boys to wallow in disturbed in cocktails, nostalgic building dedications. The centrepiece of last week's alumni celebrations at MIT was a day-long symposium entitled "Automobility", a review of the past, present and future of the car and—in the context of the programme—"of the opportunities and challenges created by the increasingly complex inter-relationships between technology, science, and society". It was all too much for many of the green heads in the audience which either dozed in repose or turned grossly to their neighbours at implications that perhaps more and better technology isn't always the answer. Which was a shame, because they thereby missed the essence of a couple of the more intriguing presentations.

Elting Morison, MIT Professor in the School of Humanities, took his text from Alfred North Whitehead, who 50 years ago in a series of lectures at Harvard argued that "the business of the future is danger"—that managing a technological world required a "vision", at once rational and conservative, in the absence of which the world "will relapse into a mere welter of minor excitements". We are in such a welter now, according to Morison, the latest "minor excitement" being the energy crisis. Constructing the appropriate vision can perhaps best be achieved, he suggested, by faking as an example the evolution of common law, itself a kind of vision, built up into the towering structure of today on a case-by-case basis originating at the village level. It might be that learning to handle complex issues like the siting of nuclear power plants should similarly depend upon the establishment of general "laws" evolved from the study of particular cases.

Specifically, Morison proposed the creation of working parties each consisting of some dozen local worthies—including economists, technologists and other "experts" as well as lay persons—to study all the pros and cons of each and every siting application. They would be aided by a staff to ferret out all the available facts, on issues ranging from nuclear radiation to the rights of private property. The working party would then lay out policy alternatives for a local referendum. "By such a process, infinitely repeated, might come a series of decisions that could lead to generalisations," according to Morison. From it "should emerge an informed citizenry, and at first a general understanding and then a general wisdom about the technological world". In the absence of some such mechanism to reduce the awesome problems raised by technology to manageable proportions and involve the people in its management, Morison is concerned that only economic or technical criteria will be used in decision making.

The car itself—mentioned only as an example in Morison's talk—was very much the centre of David Gordon Wilson's attention. English by birth, Wilson is Professor of Mechanical Engineering at MIT. While Morison took his text from Whitehead, Wilson took his from his mother-in-law—to wit, "no good deed goes unpunished". What

Boston notebook

Shocks for the old boys

Like most other American universities, MIT has old boys' days—Alumni Days—the prime purpose of which is to fundraise (there's a useful correlation between the gratitude of the Alumni for their alma mater and the size of their bank balances). But MIT, as befits such an august and responsible institution,

society needs, Wilson argued, is some negative feedback; specifically he urged the adoption of a free market economy "modified in such a way as to have social costs met in each area and each activity where they are important".

His basic thesis is that all major aspects of car use—fuel, resources and road space—are heavily underpriced and subsidised by the rest of society. His solution is to transfer these costs back to the motorist and the motor industry, and let each and every member of society—motorists and non-motorists alike—pocket the change. For example, the delays caused by the use of each car in a congested US street are estimated to be three dollars per mile. Road-use meters tripped by wires beneath the road would recover the cost from the motorists responsible. The money would then be returned to the community concerned. Resources used in car manufacture would be surcharged at a rate dependent upon their scarcity. This would provide an incentive for recycling and also encourage the producers of scarce materials—such as copper—to prove more reserves (thus reducing the surcharge and allowing more to be sold rather than simply lowering the price as it would today). Finally, petrol would be surcharged at a rate of, say, 50 cents a gallon. This would reduce consumption (by an estimated 25 per cent), but it would also

raise some \$150 thousand million a year. to be disbursed to the adult population—enough to provide everyone with an income supplement of over \$1000 a year.

The rich could afford to burn petrol. should they so wish, without guilt, while the poor would receive what they need—cash, with no strings attached.

The "modified free market" is a concept

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which, Wilson contended, is receiving a good deal of attention in academic circles these days. To have a Professor of Mechanical Engineering talk on economics—particularly to an audience of grey-haired alumni—was a nice illustration of the way that technology, and MIT, have changed since they were at school.

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