

Limits to Prediction, edited by R.B. McKern and G.C. Lowenthal.
(Australian Professional Publications, Sydney, 1985) pp. viii + 163.

This small and modest-looking book deals with one of the most eternal and intellectually demanding ambitions of mankind: predicting the future. Indeed one of the contributors, Professor Borrie, flatly rejects the possibility of completely accurate prediction in the social sciences, and the rest of the contributors amplify the problems which lead to inaccuracy. The book grew out of a meeting of the New South Wales branch of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) in 1984, with additions from the full ANZAAS Congress later in the year. All told, there are ten substantive contributions, with a brief introduction from Mr Justice Kirby and a summing up by a philosopher: perhaps appropriately, since social prediction retains an element of the metaphysical.

The main virtue of the collection is the variety of insights offered into the practices and problems of prediction. In essence, the difficulties discussed imply some sort of consensus for Professor Borrie's view that we can never get it **quite** right, but there are degrees of optimism and pessimism among the authors. Professor Caldwell offers an entertaining account of demographic projections, in which the objectivity of subsequent censuses makes the forecasters more vulnerable than those of physical outputs, where substitute products can be used as a cloak for inaccuracy. Macrae presents a useful summary of global models, emphasising their limitations, the need for internal consistency, the difficulty of integrating them into the policy-making process, and the power of reactive phenomena to disturb even the best-made models.

Helen Hughes, in examining the progress of models of individual countries used by the World Bank to analyse prospects for the developing countries, evinced a little too much doctrinal optimism for some members of the conference. I found Dr Bell's observations on political prediction unstructured and anecdotal: with the advantage of hindsight her claim that Lech Walesa is not an 'unperson' rings rather hollow. A biologist, Dr Tracey, reveals the dangers of passive acceptance of scientific diktat, with a parable about worldwide protein deficiency being diagnosed after an unduly high dietary standard had been decreed, and cured by a redefinition!

There are other sensible chapters on computers, econometric forecasting and energy scenarios. Dr Valentine includes a short section on econometric methods, but for the most part these sections are as chastening as the earlier ones, as is Professor Passmore's closing summary. Thus the book lives up to its title, emphasising the limits, rather than outlining practice in any detail. You will not find out how to conduct a Delphi analysis, or a cost-benefit analysis or to program a model. But if you are familiar with, or learning, those techniques this brief compendium will curb any excesses of zeal.

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