

managers have not benefited as much as their private sector counterparts from the widening national spectrum of earnings. This is at the very time that the radical reorganisation of public services requires that top quality managers are hired—and kept—to handle the changes.

Job security

Until recently public servants could at least console themselves that in terms of non-monetary remuneration they could make up some lost ground with the private sector. “Job security” was a key element—but one that has been undermined by privatisation, competitive tendering, and individual employment contracts based on performance. Other benefits may also be diluted. If self governing hospitals choose to adopt non-Whitley regulations employees will face less favourable terms of employment legislation on issues such as sick pay. Even their lead on less work for less pay is being eroded as private sector employees are given increasing amounts of holiday. And if regionally differentiated pay is introduced the safety net of national wage rates will be removed from those in the lower wage sectors.

Yet not all public employees are in the same boat. Police, firemen, and nurses have received annual increases well above the public sector average thanks to index linked formulas and a review body. The trade off is clear: higher pay and no strikes. So why not offer such alternatives to collective bargaining to ambulance staff and other workers in the public sector? The government’s summer enthusiasm for banning public sector strikes, particularly in emergency services, seems to have waned: it would cost the Treasury money. Review bodies cannot provide a total panacea—they cannot handle working practices—but they do take careful account of recruitment and motivation, ensuring decent treatment for public employees without recourse to strike action. It is not only the police and nurses who need a fair deal.

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Encore fin de siècle

What will the 1990s bring?

Centuries, when they move towards their end, impress on human populations the need to imagine that something has got to happen or that something will happen, and soon. Other decades may come and go, but the last in each series cannot just be let pass without notice, without change. And the choice, in modern times, seems stark: degeneration or regeneration? Whatever else happens, the sense of being unhappy with the golden mean, the norm, the life of *moyen sensuel*, is pervasive. So too is impatience with political normality. Whether seeking to bring liberty to authoritarian regimes, or, more chillingly, to restore repression, the ends of centuries urge self dramatisation.

And for the 1990s two possibilities present themselves: the

promise of renewal, of hope, of dawn—as in the 1790s—or the sense of exhaustion, of depletion, of jaded tastes and weary repetition—the 1890s. Indeed, in the 1890s a French phrase had to be coined to capture the spirit of the age: *fin de siècle*. Very little health is evoked by that phrase, few images of strength or ardour. The *fin de siècle* is metropolitan; it suggests a city scene, a café perhaps, whose denizens in their decadent self absorption have somehow failed to look out of the art nouveau window to see the gathering crowd of tramps and beggars shuffling towards the light, some carrying weapons.

The final decade of the century is the time when the level of human wishes, of human longings, explodes—wishing for the end or the beginning or some strange mixture of the two. Once upon a time the drama would have been scripted by the gods and then by God. His signs would appear: comets, epidemics, strange visitations. Now, alone with its terrible dreams, mankind is trying to write its own script, and only the sense of an ending (that may or may not bring something new) is agreed. Otherwise the script is up for grabs. It took the masterwork of that student of human dreams, Sigmund Freud, to point out how strange the dreams of the human scriptwriter were turning out to be: his *Interpretation of Dreams* was completed in 1899 and published in 1900.

Living on the edge

It is the longing for the strange, the risqué, the sciences of the unknown, that comes to the fore in the *fin de siècle*. In the 1790s we saw mesmerism, Jacobinism, terror; in the 1890s, hypnotism, spiritualism, nihilism. In the 1990s, with the slow breakdown of global ecological balance, the growth area looks like being witchcraft. As the state either abandons its medical responsibilities to its citizens, or gives up any pretence that it can afford to run a service for them, the fringe calls. The ancient Hippocratic paean to the balanced life, the life that picks its careful way between deprivation and excess, is almost deliberately being forgotten. Some of the longings for millennial events get answered: one could hear sighs of satisfaction that the San Francisco earthquake had hit this year, and people presumably want more, not less, of the same. The century’s last decade demands a life wish and also a death wish. History decides which it will be.

Medical history, as a branch of general history, can teach only that disease springs from chaos, from imbalance, from pathological social experience. The decadence of societies is probably far better proved by the way they organise the relation between income and health than it is by the kinds of drugs favoured by its various social groupings or their sexual practices. The traditional image of the *fin de siècle*—of the naughty dancing, the contrived emptiness, the immovability of oppressive political regimes—pales into insignificance beside the daily toll on the bodies of human inhabitants. The extraordinary events in Eastern Europe and the doomy visions of a luxurious but anxiety ridden West both have their price and offer their various hopes and fears. In the 1990s the answers to the problems of living (in whatever sphere) seem unlikely to be sought other than in the extreme, the iconoclastic, the menacing, the anti-Hippocratic, the desperate remedies that flourish as Time forces a choice on humanity.

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