

Philip Selby, Mal Schechter and others, *Ageing 2000: A Challenge for Society*, MTP Press for Sandoz Institute for Health and Socio-Economic Studies, 1982, 222 pp., £10.95, ISBN 0 85200 471 0.

Although the preparation of *Ageing 2000* involved some thoughtful and experienced people, whose names appear regularly in the literature of ageing, the book adds little of substance to our understanding of the implications of the ageing of nations at the turn of the century.

It fails to stand up to the test of a carefully constructed cross-national study from which conclusions could reasonably be drawn. Although its launching was timed to coincide with the World Assembly on Ageing last year, it contains nothing of substance which was not much better provided in the documents of the World Assembly itself, which are widely available from the United Nations and its associated agencies.

The editors of *Ageing 2000*, who draw upon the findings from sixteen countries, are pessimistic about the future. The preface by Sadruddin Aga Khan is packed with sentimental views about loss of past institutions and customs in spite of the fact that scholars are now confirming they were not half as nice at the time, as they are cracked up to be by those who deal in nostalgia rather than hard facts.

Although described as an international *survey*, *Ageing 2000* seems somewhat random in its choice of countries and questions. Half the respondents who answered the questions, on which the book is based, are themselves associated with medicine. Some are sociologists, but there are relatively few concerned with economic and social planning or who have direct experience of the provision of services, apart from health care, and none who reflected the views of older people themselves, although many of the countries involved have effective movements of retired people.

As a result, questions about a matter as fundamental as income maintenance, on which much of the future challenge will focus, produced no more than a series of rather bland phrases which restate the obvious: for example, with reference to Egypt, 'The burden of pensions will rise as the number of elderly increases and inflation aggravates financing of benefits' or Italy 'that [unstated] problems will worsen, leading to the need for [unstated] reforms'. When the *evidence* is then used to produce *recommendations*, simplistic notions such as raising the eligibility in contribution rates are offered, although the book fails to state what they are, how they relate to income levels, cost of housing indices, or which economics it is dealing with. Nor does it deal in a satisfactory way with the difference between the absolute poverty in (say) India or the relative poverty in Western Europe.

Many of the recommendations bear no relation to the realities of economic circumstances. For example, it is suggested that workers should be encouraged to save in preparation for their old age. That is what many of the last generation thought they had done; but inflation made this unrealistic in the past and combined with unemployment might make things worse in the future. An argument for the introduction of means-tested benefits from a U.S. expert reflects an ideological rather than a scientific response.

The final chapter comprises a series of single headlines under the title of 'Beacons for Policy Makers'. The three U.K. respondents are Professor John Grimley Evans, Professor Margot Jefferys and Eric Midwinter. Their comments are reported to state the need to change the popular view of retirement from a brief prelude to death to the longest period of stability in our lifetime: to recognise that it is in your interest to care about ageing and to recognise that much age-associated disability is due to socio-environmental failings rather than the intrusive and inevitable biological factors. The most interesting question which is not answered is to know which expert made which comment. However, all of them, and many other thoughtful respondents, really have much more important statements to make than these rather trite shorthand notes. The future of the world for an ageing population is a good deal more complex and interesting than the collection suggests.

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Stephen Crystal, *America's Old Age Crisis*, Basic Books, New York, 1982, 232 pp., \$16.50, ISBN 0 465 00124 6.

This is an important and timely book. It is important because of the insights Crystal provides into the contradictory nature and perverse consequences of policy-making affecting elderly persons in the U.S.A. It is timely because of the current and continuing assaults on the structure of benefits and services for America's elderly population launched by the Reagan administration, and because the author sets out a number of reasoned policy alternatives that he believes would resolve the most pressing and critical fiscal and psychosocial components of the 'crisis' in public policy.

Crystal's analysis of the 'crisis' leads him to conclude that the existing array of income maintenance, health care, retirement, and welfare policies are inequitable, inefficient, and insufficient. They tend to isolate the aged from participating in society's central institutions – principally, the workplace and increasingly the family – and they have produced, and/or continue to maintain, two more or less separate and unequal classes of old people. The majority group, the better-off economically, socially and health-wise are largely forced, or seduced, into retirement and subsidised at the expense of the smaller worse-off group – the very old, the poor and the infirm elderly. The author further asserts that the gap in income, health status, and needs between these two groups will continue to widen – at the further expense of the truly needy – unless more appropriate policies are adopted and put into practice; policies that give credence to the differential needs of these groups for income, for health and social care, and for participation in the larger society.

Crystal's approach to the subject matter is straightforward, non-polemical and well reasoned. He skilfully draws upon and blends into his analysis a wide variety of materials and perspectives – sociological, economic, historical, and political – to present his arguments, conclusions and recommendations. He demolishes carefully constructed health, economic and psychosocial 'myths'