

time-bomb ticking away under Britain's major employers" and women should be "encouraged to make use of their skills and return to work", his solution is a publicity campaign encouraging employers to provide childcare facilities as an incentive.

The logic runs: the employers want the women, so they will make it possible for them to work. This formula ignores the other side of the coin: that women may end up being forced to work regardless of whether or not their firm provides a creche, and will have to arrange and pay for their own childcare provision.

And this, says Peter Moss, co-author of a recent report on childcare provision throughout the European Community, is exactly what has happened in America. Alongside an enormous expansion of women in the labour force has gone a similar growth in the provision of private nurseries. Employers themselves have done very little. Where they have, it has only been to attract high flyers into top jobs and not for women on the factory floor.

The Pre-school Playgroups Association insists that much more could be achieved with support from central government. "It is important," say the PPA, "that any development of work-place nurseries is not made the sole responsibility of employers." The PPA hopes, however, that this government "initiative" will herald more resources for the under-fives. A reversal of the Inland Revenue ruling of 1985 which stipulated that nurseries provided or funded by employers should be taxed as a benefit in kind would be a step in the right direction.

Vicky Hutchings

## Bunker mentality

After six years of silence, Home Office scientists whose remarkably reassuring calculations about the likely level of destruction in Britain after a nuclear war have repeatedly been attacked, finally appeared before a scientific audience to discuss the accuracy of their analysis. The meeting, held last week by the Royal Statistical Society, discussed different computer models of the effects of nuclear attack in Britain.

But the meeting concluded with the Home Office once again seeking shelter from the nuclear debate. The two scientists who spoke, under the watchful eye of half a dozen civil service "minders" and advisers, merely said their piece and no more. They might, one said, later reply to criticism in (doubtless, ministerially-approved) writing.

Since the present debate about the

effectiveness of civil defence began in the early 1980s, the Home Office has always refused to engage in any open discussion about the accuracy of its models, or the scientific utility of civil defence. UK government studies typically suggest casualty levels about half of those in comparable US studies. Instead of debating, the Home Office's chief scientists have repeatedly circulated private documents criticising and libelling the critics—but have never been willing to talk to them.

When the British Medical Association reported on the medical effects of nuclear war in 1983, the head of the Scientific Research and Development Branch, John Miles, secretly denounced the report as "strongly influenced by CND type propaganda ... [it] cannot be regarded as an objective scientific document." Miles was found out and the Home Office had to apologise to the BMA.

Another secret memorandum denouncing Home Office critics, which followed the first major report on the subject, published here (NSS, 1 October 1982), has just come to light. That report on "Planning for Genocide", by Open University scientist Dr Philip Steadman and myself, revealed many bizarre features of the Home Office model. For example, no one died because of fires, nuclear explosion, heat or burns. Half or fully demolished houses were also deemed to be just as radiation-proof as those still standing. Although this report was denounced as "damaging the cause of civil defence" (our italics), Mr Miles never published his 16-point rebuttal of the NSS article, lest the rebuttal itself be rebutted. Instead, it was circulated privately to local civil defence officials.

Last week's meeting thus continued the pattern of officials being unwilling to respond to scientific debate—while secretly accusing their critics of bias or unscientific behaviour. The two scientists who appeared, George Carr-Hill and Sam Hadjipavlou, had however moved some distance in the intervening six years. They have now recomputed the blast effects of nuclear explosions, producing new figures much nearer to those used by their critics.

But the new openness was illusory. Not only did they not follow their calculations through to a final death-toll, they backed off from any further debate, while a Home Office scientific adviser denounced the critics for having an "incommensurable" model. The critics' model, produced by Scientists Against Nuclear Arms (SANA), is, however, "incommensurable" only because the Home Office won't let anyone have access to their own model. *Duncan Campbell*

## Debt corrector

The proposed housing finance bill announced in the Queen's Speech on Tuesday will lead to a doubling of council house rents and force better-off tenants into the private sector, or oblige them to contribute for the first time to the costs of housing benefit for the poorest.

Though they've made the headlines this week, the proposals are not new. They were set out in detail in a consultative paper published in July (see "The stranglehold tightens on council housing", NSS, 5 August 1988) and it appears that the framework proposed then is little changed.

The new bill is designed to "ring-fence" council housing revenue

accounts: it will stop councils using rate money to subsidise rents and vice versa. All the present housing subsidies will be replaced by a new "housing revenue account subsidy" which will be much more tightly controlled by central government. Councils' leeway to set rents will be undermined.

Any surpluses due to the higher rents (they are expected to rise in three stages) will be used to pay housing benefit, currently paid directly by central government unless the principle that the relief of poverty is a national responsibility.

Higher rents will also make council housing more inaccessible to the poor. One of Britain's postwar achievements was to break the vicious link between poverty and poor

## WELFARE WATCH

### *The second OPCS report on disability indicates that most disabled people need a higher income*

Although last week's report, *The financial circumstances of disabled adults living in private households* (HMSO, £11.50), is only the second of six presenting the findings of the OPCS disability surveys, it is the one on which most weight is likely to be placed in debates on the financial needs of disabled people living in the community. Like many other survey reports, it is open to a variety of interpretations.

Take, for example, the tables showing the extra weekly costs incurred as a result of disabilities. According to disabled people themselves, the average, when the survey was carried out in 1985, was £5.70 a week for pensioners and £6.70 for those under pension age. Even when people were classified by severity of disability, those in the top two out of ten categories claimed to be spending only an extra £10.50 a week if over pension age and £13.10 if younger.

Compare this with the two benefits specifically aimed at meeting disability costs—attendance allowance, worth £32.95 or £22 a week depending on whether both day and night attendance is needed, and mobility allowance worth £23.05—and you could argue that most people getting these benefits are being over-compensated.

Some of the survey's other findings, however, are less reassuring. One in four disabled people said they needed to spend more because of their disabilities but could not afford to. Although the question referred only to disability-related expenditure, the items most commonly men-

tioned were the three basic needs: fuel, clothing or bedding and food.

Each of these was mentioned by half those who needed to spend more. One in six disabled householders could only afford second-hand clothes. The difficulties disabled people have in keeping warm are emphasised by the fact that the most frequently needed type of unmet clothing need was for thermal underwear.

The report shows that, after deducting the costs of disability, most disabled adults have below-average resources. If, in some cases, attendance and mobility allowances exceed the amounts actually spent on attendance and mobility, the excess merely compensates for part of the income lost through disability.

Among disabled people of working age, loss of earnings is the biggest financial penalty. For those able to work, making decently paid jobs available to them would do more than anything else to raise living standards—especially if accompanied by changes in the benefit rules to encourage rather than discourage part-time or intermittent work.

Among disabled pensioners, age and poverty are linked by the fact that the very old tend to be the most severely disabled, to get less income from occupational pensions and to have used up their savings. Nigel Lawson's half-promise of bigger benefits for pensioners is unlikely to help much. Abolishing the age limit which prevents people becoming disabled over 65 from claiming a mobility allowance would do far more good. *Tony Lynes*