

SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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All contributions are subject to editing.

EDITORIAL

DISCONTINUITY

"D ISCONTINUITY"—in a menacing sense nearly synonymous with "disaster" or with "social and economic breakdown"—was the arresting theme of the opening day's address at the Society annual meeting last October. The guest speaker was William W. Whitson, Ph.D., of the Congressional Research Service.

Dr. Whitson is a fluent and engaging gentleman. This listener found his ideas hard to appraise, yet well worth pondering. We are pleased that the address will appear in the *Record*, and offer this bare bones synopsis just to whet our readers' appetite for absorbing the complete essay when that volume arrives. The message is one to be read in an atmosphere of peace and quiet, whether that be in one's home or office.

The Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress, apprehensive lest its forecasts for the global economy might be overlooking something basic, commissioned Dr. Whitson's study. His committee was to examine the prospects that socio-political change might range far beyond that foreseeable through customary projections of past and present conditions.

Describing his Committee's initial exploration, Dr. Whitson said:

"... there began to emerge a consensus about the future that was very disturbing. Perhaps the most disturbing finding was a sense of alienation of people, in both America and Europe, not only from their most sacred institutions but also from one another. We found a profound sense of distrust—in politics, disdain for authority and government. We found a feeling of pessimism about economic institutions ... But we also felt that this is just a matter of choice. It does not have to be that way we choose fear, for whatever reason."

As chilling examples of conceivable discontinuities, the speaker gave these:

"At the extreme is a possible shift of the north and south poles around the year 2000. A serious survey gives this a fairly good (sic) chance of happening. . . At a less devastating level, you have the possibility of a nuclear war, which is a tea party compared to a polar shift. At a yet lesser level you have the sense of a coming conflict between two belief systems—the old one that security is physical and that we must continue in an adversarial and highly competitive mode—and another, that people are joined, not only institutionally but spiritually."

How can we hope to deal with prospects such as these without becoming simply paralyzed by fear? On this, Dr. Whitson's summing up and advice were:

"... we find that in giving away their sense of risk to an institution such as government, people also give away a sense of responsibility. They feel that they can do nothing; they're simply part of the system. But responsibility can be retrieved not by alienation or competitively, but by *joining* ... You can foster innovation and confidence rather than fear, because they are opposite sides of the same coin."

Readers who are prompted to pursue this theme will find that Dr. Whitson, in addition to developing it in his own way, has given useful leads to outside reading. E.J.M.

Death

John S. Thompson, F.S.A. 1908

We record the death of John Spencer Thompson, the oldest member of the Society in point of age (95) and in length of membership as a Fellow (71 years).

Mr. Thompson was a native of Canada and a graduate of the University of Toronto where he was a gold medalist in mathematics. After the then fashion of many Canadians he moved south and decided to tackle the actuarial examinations. He became a Fellow in 1908 (another Canadian who qualified before attaining age 25). Subsequently, he became

> F.I.A. 1910 F.F.A. 1911

and in 1914 he became a Charter Member and Fellow of the Casualty Actuarial Society.

There is more to Mr. Thompson's record than mere length of years or even Fellowships in actuarial bodies. He was an active member and faithful servant of the Actuarial Society and had served as Secretary, as Editor, and as a Member of the Council. He was elected President 1932-1933.

His was not a silent voice at Society meetings as the indices to the *Transactions* will show. Worthy of particular mention is the fact that he was the representative of the Actuarial Society on the Guertin Committee and he wrote the report on the construction of the CSO 1941 Table (*TASA* XLII). New mortality tables are now much more common than they used to be—perhaps the 1941 Table showed the way.

Space does not permit us to chronicle his many activities within and without the insurance business.

Mr. Thompson's life span covered many major happenings in the life insurance business. If he kept a diary of these events it would provide interesting reading. Maybe there were giants in the earth in those days.

A.C.₩.

Contributions to the Actuarial Education & Research Fund, 208 S. LaSalle St., Chicago, 60604, in memory of any deceased Society member are acknowledged to the donor and to the member's family.