

Independence is the mother of invention

I TRAVELLED to Cambridge with mixed feelings last Friday morning. In the first place I was nervous about speaking at the Mensa conference "Inventing the Future". It is a subject that interests me but I've always doubted whether I would pass the Mensa IQ entry test.

I also had misgivings about meeting Sir Clive Sinclair on more or less equal terms. I had interviewed him a couple of times and met him at press conferences; in normal circumstances I would have welcomed the opportunity to talk to him informally.

But Sir Clive, who is a man I admire, had recently done a deal with Robert Maxwell from whom I and my colleagues bought Financial Weekly last May. One of the opening lines of my prepared speech, stolen in the event by my chairman Brian J Ford, the broadcaster, writer and science populariser, was: "We have just *bought* a company from Robert Maxwell".

I was not at all sure that the 'rescue' of Sinclair Research by Maxwell's company Hollis Brothers was a good thing either for Sir Clive or for Sinclair Research or indeed for Britain's microcomputer industry at large.

But at Sir Clive's party that evening, attended by all the Mensa delegates and the speakers, the entrepreneur seemed quite sanguine about the deal that would have given Maxwell a controlling 75% stake in Sinclair Research. We were discussing the possibility of Maxwell's youngest son Kevin joining the Sinclair Research board when Sir Clive was called away to take a phone call.

When he returned he announced that Maxwell had withdrawn.

Sir Clive seemed quite sanguine about that too. He doesn't give much away. He pointed out that Sinclair Research had recently done a deal with the Dixons retailing group, which now includes Currys, and that



Sinclair: sanguine

Financial Weekly's editor TOM Lloyd was party given by Sir Clive Sinclair when the deal broke that Robert Maxwell had decided to draw from his £12m rescue of Sinclair Research. Lloyd recounts how the news was greeted and discusses the deal at the conference at which he and Sir Clive had been speaking.

therefore the company's severe cash problems had been eased.

But Sir Clive was clearly puzzled about the reasons for Maxwell's withdrawal. Other things equal, the £10m Dixons deal should have made the rescue project that much more attractive to Hollis and to its controlling shareholder.

There has been speculation that Maxwell may have pulled out because of heavy commitments to other projects, including a £60m investment in new colour printing presses and the purchase of a stake in the French TV broadcasting satellite.

Sir Clive suspects Maxwell's advisers may, on closer inspection of the rescue project, have come to the view that the initial £12m cash injection might have led to even heavier cash calls to finance the computer company's development of so-called Wafer Scale Integration semiconductor products.

Whatever the reasons for Maxwell's withdrawal the upshot is that for the time being at least Sinclair Research remains independent.

Sir Clive is still looking for new outside finance but the emergency, thanks to Maxwell's intervention eight weeks ago. Sinclair Research is now entering a cash period, so there is time to put together a different kind of package involving a group of investors

Brian J Ford presented a wealth of evidence to show how unpredictable and whimsical the spirit of invention is. He pointed out that practically every invention of any significance has been the result of a lucky accident or the experiments of a gifted amateur.

Ford's list of supporting examples for his thesis was long and illuminating. I shall mention just two: the development of the disk memory at IBM and of the float glass process at Pilkington's, both of which would, by less erudite commentators, have been adduced as counter-examples of the Ford argument.

The idea of the disk memory did, indeed, originate in IBM's laboratories but it was not invented as part of the computer giant's strategy. Ford quoted from DA Schon's account of the affair: "It was a bootleg project, developed in spite of a firm warning from management that the project had to be dropped for budget reasons. A handful of men ignored the warning. They broke the rules, and actually risked their jobs to work on a project they believed in."

Ford went on to point out that the idea of float glass was the brainchild of several independent workers. In 1902 William E Heal of Marion, Indiana patented a system for making sheet glass by floating it on to a bath of molten metal, "preferably tin or its alloys". In 1905 H K Hitchcock of Walton, Pennsylvania wanted to make glass floating on "a practically continuous liquid bed formed

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ideas came to fruition. Alastair Pilkington was already working within a company when he caught the float glass bug. He insisted on pressing ahead with the project in the face of practical difficulties.

At one stage they had a pilot plant erected and working for over a year, producing nothing but unsatisfactory glass. Eventually, part of the plant became inoperative and suddenly quality improved dramatically. From that accident emerged the modern float glass principle.

Ford's message is clear. The propensity to invent, though extremely important, cannot be invoked by systems or by careful project planning.

Inventions just happen. The trick is to so arrange things that when they do happen the added ingredients needed to turn them into commercially successful innovations are swiftly and readily available.

But the importance of the invention of his or her independence at almost any cost, has not yet been fully recognised. The rescue of Acorn by Olivetti and the proposed Research by Maxwell, are examples of how *not* to handle inventive entrepreneurs in difficulties. As Brian Ford pointed out, it is impossible to say what makes inventors invent but equally it is clear that taking away their independence is likely to stop them inventing.