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A bandwagon without the banned

[no, I don't understand the heading either; Guardian sub-editor, not me - WP 2006]

Governments have offered everything except help to environmentalists. Walter Patterson has spent two decades watching a deeply unedifying performance.

LET me see if I've got this straight. To achieve lower prices for electricity users you're raising the price 15 per cent. You're taking the Government out of the electricity business, by passing an act giving the Secretary of State for Energy powers to set prices; to order power station operators what fuel to store and how much and when to use it; and to change the rules when he sees fit. You're creating a free market in electricity-generation by imposing on distributors a statutory obligation to buy nuclear power no matter what it costs - but subsidising it by taxing fossil fuel at an arbitrary rate, and by making taxpayers carry the long-term risks.

So far so good - I think I'm beginning to see how your mind works. You're promoting the efficient use of energy by cutting the budget of your own Energy Efficiency Office. And didn't you tackle the problem of acid rain by fighting a stubborn rearguard action in Brussels against joining the "30 per cent club" of countries committed to reducing sulphur emissions on an agreed timetable? Yes, I thought so. To be sure, you did eventually agree a timetable; but I'm reassured to note that you haven't actually done anything practical about it, like seeing that all three desulphurisation plants promised are actually ordered, although you keep alluding to them as though they were already in service.

Weren't you also providing international leadership on air quality by blocking a European directive requiring catalytic converters on cars? You almost lost your way by yielding - after years of impressively obtuse indifference - to all that vociferous clamour about poisoning children with lead from petrol; but at least you didn't go as far as converting all your own cars to unleaded.

I'm sure you realise that in your approach to energy and environment you're carrying on a noble tradition with a proud history. As far back as 1964 you were telling Parliament that no plutonium from British "civil" reactors was ever used for nuclear weapons. You maintained this line for almost two decades, knowing perfectly well that it was - let us say - economical with the truth. In 1968 you became one of the three sponsoring countries of the Non-Proliferation Treaty to control the spread of nuclear weapons; but you kept on supplying plutonium - potential bomb material - to countries like Japan, even when they were refusing to join the Treaty.

You insisted for more than two decades that nuclear power was cheap, and heaped scorn on those who suspected otherwise, until recent developments made it expedient for you to acknowledge the true economic status of the technology, before the stock market did it for you.

In the early 1970s, when the public became restive about excess packaging and non-returnable bottles, you held a "national conference" on packaging and the environment, and set up a committee, and did nothing. You welcomed the efforts of environmental groups to recycle paper; but you declined actually to use the recycled products in your own vast paperwork, so that recycling suffocated in its own success.

In 1974 you passed the Control of Pollution Act; but the part of it that actually controlled pollution you did not implement, and the part you did implement kept the pollution secret. In 1976 you passed the Endangered Species Act; but you did not enforce it, leaving offenders unimpeded except for private prosecutions by environmental groups.

In the late 1970s you acclaimed the achievements of local activists who took it upon themselves to insulate the homes of those who could not afford to do it themselves. Then you cut off the funds for insulation projects.

You established National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Then you turned them into military firing ranges, motorways or reservoirs. You arranged inquiries into plans for airports, power stations, coal mines, nuclear waste sites and other controversial projects. Then you went ahead and did what you originally intended to do, regardless of inquiry findings, unless the project occasioned immediate political embarrassment, like Wing airport or Nirex nuclear dumps. Your rhetoric always portrayed your decision as a manifestation of your "democratic mandate".

The pattern was always the same. When some troublemaker drew attention to an energy or environmental problem, you denied that the problem existed. Then, as the evidence mounted, you set up an inquiry or a committee of the "great and good", who could usually be relied upon to blur the outlines in your favour. You invited the troublemaker to meetings

and discussions, and had your pictures taken together. You staged conferences. If matters became too pressing to ignore, you created a Department of the Environment, or a Department of Energy, by changing the lettering on a few doors in Whitehall. The people behind the doors were the same, with the same attitude and the same brief, but it sounded as though you were doing something, without the inconvenience of doing it.

At worst, if the problem really threatened to get out of hand, you blamed it on someone else: the thoughtless consumer, the venal industrialist, the environmental alarmist, the unscrupulous foreigner.

Oh, but you did wring your hands over it, though. Amory Lovins of Friends of the Earth once aptly characterised your approach: you were ready to offer absolutely anything, short of actual help.

Now, as we face the 1990s, the green noise from your direction grows ever louder. You proclaim your concern about energy and environment, and your determination to let the people decide what is best, with the fullest possible information. If we look back over the historical record, we know what to expect: posturing, bombast, self-congratulation, self-exculpation, monitory finger-waving, obfuscation, demands for more research while cutting funds, the whole empty charade, as the energy system unravels and the environment disintegrates.

A bitter political aphorism holds that the citizens of a society get the government they deserve. But what have we done to deserve this?

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