

(Given at a symposium at Oxford University organized by the students of the Human Sciences Department, November 1990)

Environmental Troublemaking

Walter C Patterson

When I am invited to do an interview or a broadcast, the researcher invariably asks me; "Now what shall we call you, Mr Patterson?". I usually wind up saying something like: "Well, I'm an independent analyst and writer on energy and environment" which is very difficult to get on a television screen. I have never yet had the nerve to tell them just to call me what I really think of myself as: a troublemaker.

I know plenty of people, very good people, who are analysts and writers on these subjects. Unfortunately, I know far too few who are also troublemakers - because a troublemaker does not just analyse and comment on an issue. A troublemaker actually tries to do something about it. In our society, if you take it upon yourself to confront an issue when those who should be responsible are making a mess of it, that makes you a troublemaker. You immediately make trouble for those who are in charge, and they do not like it. Those who are supposed to be in charge only want to hear from you about once every five years, at election time and all they want to hear is "Yes". Almost every politician that I know - there are honourable exceptions - wants fundamentally your vote and a quiet life. If you disturb the quiet life you are a troublemaker.

However, I did not become a troublemaker until I was already old enough to be a stable, reliable member of society. I was a docile and acquiescent citizen until I was already in my thirties. Then came the environmental crisis. Most people under twenty-five will not realize that we did have an environmental crisis that long ago, in the late 1960s. It was on all the front pages and all the television programmes. There were enormous kerfuffles between governments and there was, eventually, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm in June 1972, at which the Swedes pointed out that we in Britain were sending them our sulphur dioxide. Mrs Thatcher has now begun to catch up, about two decades later, and indeed so have her political colleagues.

As it happens, I was trained as a nuclear physicist - an academic, that is, not a nuclear engineer. I knew nothing about nuclear power engineering. At the end of the 1960s, nevertheless, I began to get interested in the nuclear power issue. The responsible authorities of the day all declared that people were only worried about nuclear power because they did not know enough about it. The authorities spent a lot of time explaining why it was a benign and cheap way to generate electricity. So I began studying, reading and talking to people in the nuclear business and the more I learned about it the more concerned I became. Before I knew it, I had become a troublemaker.

In July 1972, after returning from the Stockholm conference, I was invited to join the then tiny full-time staff of the little Poland Street office of the embryonic Friends of the

Earth organization in London. A year later a small handful of us, in Poland Street and around the country, including some honourable and far-sighted journalists, set in motion what was in fact the first public controversy in Britain about nuclear power. I suppose you could say that the rest is history, which did not exactly end a couple of weeks ago but should at least be in its final stages. On 9 November 1989, the government announced that it was withdrawing the existing nuclear power stations from privatization, because it had been told that investors would not buy them, and it would authorize no further nuclear stations until at least 1994. Independent commentators agreed that the decision was tantamount to ending Britain's nuclear power programme - less than 17 years after we initiated the controversy.

This is how it often happens to an individual. You suddenly notice that maybe the air smells nasty, or the water tastes funny, or you learn, by rumour or by a report in the media, or one of your friends tells you, that somebody out there is proposing to do something that strikes you, for one reason or another, as transcendently dumb. Then it is up to you to take the next step - because it is not good enough just to moan about it in the pub. If you really take yourself seriously in this context, it is up to you to try to do something about it. One of the reasons that I joined Friends of the Earth back in 1972 - I worked as a full-time staff member for six years - was that the people who were launching this organization always tackled environmental issues with the expectation that we would win them. We never thought that the big battalions out there were going to roll over us, that there was nothing anybody could do, either as an individual or as a small underfunded organization. We always went in on the basis that sooner or later right would prevail, and we thought we were right. As a matter of fact, we often did win. We also helped quite a few other people to get the feeling that you could win environmental battles.

That, I have to stress, does not mean that you win the war. Any battle is only a particular issue, a particular decision. It is rather like playing Space Invaders. No matter how many you win, they keep coming. But if you are serious about troublemaking, you have to start out with the premise that you want to win one. That, in the minds of those who are in authority, variously appointed or elected for a particular issue, is going to make you a troublemaker, because what you are intending to do is to force those responsible to change their policy and their plans. For instance, in September 1973 I took about half a cubic metre of documents in a suitcase up to a tiny village on the west coast of Scotland, which was called Drumbuie - not quite the liqueur, but close. The massed forces of the then Department of Trade and Industry, the construction companies and the oil companies were all proposing to move in on these thirteen small houses and raze the whole neighbourhood to set up a site where they could construct concrete oil-production platforms. In the living-room of the local chemist, I spent two hours talking to a group of local people in the West Highlands, telling them what they could hardly believe: that there was a possibility of stopping these big battalions. In due course we and a lot of other friends and colleagues and other organizations, led by the National Trust of Scotland, won that battle. In August the following year the government rejected the application for the platform site.

At the same time, that same winter, the Central Electricity Generating Board, as it then was, revealed to the astonishment of everybody that from 1974 to 1983 it planned to order 32 pressurized-water reactor nuclear power stations. A lot of people thought this was not a great idea. Eventually we went through an extraordinary episode, when companies were actually advertising nuclear power stations in full-page advertisements in the daily press. Westinghouse and General Electric and all the other reactor manufacturers were out there trying to persuade us that we should pick this one, not that one. Some of us thought that they should not pick any of them. As it turned out we won that one too. In July 1974 the government turned down that plan as well.

In the course of these first few years of my involvement as a troublemaker, I realized that the one particular contribution, the one distinction that I could actually lay some claim to, was that I think I established the practice of the subversive use of the three-piece suit. If you happened to have an opportunity for an audience with Cabinet ministers or company directors, it was much more difficult for them if they did not realize until after you left that they had been talking to a weirdo.

The nuclear power issue, the one about which I happen to know the most, because it just happens to have dominated most of my troublemaking life, turned out to be a breeding-ground for a quite extraordinarily wide range of other troublemakers, not only in Britain but around the world. The nuclear power issue has been probably the single most continuous and relentless environmental issue, the longest-running that the planet has thus far seen. I do, however, rather think that we may be on the verge of meeting two more contenders for that title - first, tropical rainforests, and, coming up fast, the greenhouse effect.

As to nuclear power, it's been very interesting for me to watch how people have found themselves involved in the issue. It happens in many different ways. It happens frequently at a very local level, in a village like Luxulyan in Cornwall or Mullwharchar in southwest Scotland. The village of Luxulyan suddenly finds that the CEGB has decided that it is going to move in and apply for planning permission to build a nuclear power station. The same happens at Portskewett in south Wales. The local people are absolutely appalled at this idea, but they know nothing about it. So they begin to get together. They talk among themselves. They start writing letters. They write letters to their local Member of Parliament. They write letters to the local newspaper. The word begins to spread.

By that time, the late 1970s, some of the local people had heard of organizations like Friends of the Earth and contacted them. They began to hold public meetings. They would invite people from the CEGB or the Department of Energy to come and talk to them and to debate with people from one of the environmental organizations who knew something about the subject. The local people would learn continually, study the subject, find what the other people's arguments were, find out what the counter-arguments were, and pursue this until they developed a level of expertise themselves. In due course, as turned out to be necessary in Luxulyan, they would chain themselves to bulldozers - which they did. The group of people involved there included local vicars and priests,

farmers, publicans, school teachers, gentlemen landlords, and so on. They all put aside their various differences and concentrated on the interlopers and they drove them away. The CEBG abandoned its plans for a nuclear power plant at Luxulyan.

The same considerations were true at Mullwharchar, where the government was proposing to carry out research for a repository for high-level nuclear waste. The local people said, "We aren't having it". Eventually their opposition was so stubborn and so high-profile that in 1981 the government of the day suddenly announced that, "Well, actually, we know enough about high-level nuclear waste disposal anyway, so we aren't going to carry on with these drillings anywhere, any more. We'll just wait and find out what they discover in other parts of the world." This was fine as far as the people of Mullwharchar were concerned, although it wasn't necessarily a good idea for the rest of the world.

All of these activities, broadly speaking, have involved opposition to a policy which has been advocated by one or other responsible group in government or in corporate life in Britain. The same pattern follows broadly in most of the rest of the industrial world. More recently, however, it has been gratifying to find that a lot of people who came into the business, so to speak, to defend their own interests, to make trouble because they thought that the government or a big company was going to make trouble for them, have finally got away from what we were calling "NIMBY" long before Nicholas Ridley called it "NIMBY" - the acronym "Not In My Back Yard". "NIMBY" emerged back when they were building power lines in Britain, back in the 1950s, and then motorways and bypasses and all the other things that made people argue, "Don't put it here; put it in his back yard". Eventually we managed to take a much more broad-based and national and ultimately international approach to these issues. If an idea is fundamentally a bad idea, it doesn't really matter whether you're getting it out of your back yard and into somebody else's. What matters is to change the idea completely.

I and a number of others argued very strongly in the 1970s, in the forum that we then had, which was usually the local pub, that it was never good enough simply to say, "Don't do this and don't do it here". It was important at that time to be able to say, when you could, "Do that instead". In other words, advocate a positive policy, instead of being invariably in the position of "stopping progress", stopping some kind of project or proposal which was advocated by those who were supposed to be responsible for the public good. That transformation has become quite important even in some of the other issues we encounter now. On the energy issue, it has been a major factor for a long time, because we have long been saying, in organizations such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, how important it is, for instance, to talk about energy efficiency and about renewable energy technologies and clean combustion technologies. But that is the kind of problem that is going to be confronting you if and when you find yourselves wanting to become troublemakers.

I think the nuclear issue in Britain is now likely to subside, although it may not subside as fast as I and some others would like it to subside. I think if I were going to pick a "tip for the top" for the next generation, and possibly longer, I would put my money on the

greenhouse effect. In November 1989, I attended the publication of a report - *Energy Policy in the Greenhouse*, by Wilfrid Bach and Florentine Krause - which was a stunning analysis of the implications of the greenhouse effect for basic policy for governments around the world. Governments are not really doing much to get to grips with this sort of problem - which is where the troublemaking comes in. Just before the publication, I was in Lancaster talking to a group of sixth-formers and I must admit that the quality of the questions that were being asked, and the quality of the reactions that we were generally getting from this group of school youngsters, gave me one of the most gratifying experiences that I have recently had. I have the feeling that matters are in good hands, that the next generation of troublemakers is already beginning to mount the barricades.

Troublemaking is habit-forming. If you once get the idea that, really, the emperor has no clothes, that you and your friends and your community can actually take steps to improve your lives and perhaps to benefit others as well, that you don't have to sit back and let the "powers that be" do it for you, then things can happen with remarkable speed - as we have seen in eastern Europe. In fact, to me it was an extraordinary and metaphorically rather startling coincidence to find that I was in the studio of the BBC "Newsnight" programme when the British government decided to abandon its nuclear power plans, the night they opened the Berlin wall.

I would leave you with just one message. Whenever you see "responsible" authorities cocking something up, do what you have to do. Make trouble.

© Walt Patterson 1990-2006