

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#618 - The Bridge To The High Road -- Part 1

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The environmental movement is treading water and slowly drowning. There is abundant evidence that our efforts --and they have been formidable, even heroic --our efforts have largely failed. (For example, see REHW #613.) After 30 years of exceedingly hard work and tremendous sacrifice, we have failed to stem the tide of environmental deterioration.

Make no mistake: our efforts have had a beneficial effect. Things would be much worse today if our work of the past 30 years had never occurred. However, the proper way to judge ourselves is not to ask, Have we made things better? Clearly we have. But the proper question is, Have our efforts been adequate? Have we succeeded? Have we even come close to stemming the tide of destruction? And, more deeply, has our vision been commensurate with the scale and scope of the problems we set out to solve? To those questions, if we are honest with ourselves, we must answer No.

What then are we to do? A few things have become clear as our work has evolved over the past quarter century. This short series will reinforce some old ideas and introduce some new ones for sustainable development. The series is intended to provoke thought and debate, and certainly is not offered as the last word on anything.

Key ideas

Open, democratic decision-making will be an essential component of any successful strategy. After the Berlin wall fell, we got a glimpse of what had happened to the environment and the people under the Soviet dictatorship.[1] The Soviets had some of the world's strictest environmental laws on the books, but without the ability for citizens to participate in decisions, or blow the whistle on egregious violations, those laws meant nothing. Eastern Europe was thoroughly trashed under Soviet rule, and it will be decades (or longer) before repairs can be effected. Several generations of humans were sacrificed, and their natural environment was decimated.

For the same reason that science cannot find reliable answers without open peer review, bureaucracies (whether public or private) cannot achieve beneficial results without active citizen participation in decisions and strong protections for whistle-blowers.[2] Without many people looking at a problem and bringing their different viewpoints to bear on it, errors remain uncorrected, narrow perspectives and selfish motives are rewarded, and the general welfare will not usually be promoted (to paraphrase the Constitution).

The fundamental importance of democratic decision-making means that our strategies must not focus on legislative battles. Clearly, we must contend for the full power of government to be harnessed toward achieving our goals, but this is quite different from focusing our efforts on lobbying campaigns to convince Congress or a state legislature to do the right thing from time to time. Lobbying can mobilize people for the short term, but mere mobilization does not create long-term organization. Mobilizing is not the same as organizing. During the past 30 years, the environmental movement has had some notable successes mobilizing people, but few successes building long-term organizations that people can live their lives around and within (the way many families in the '30s, '40s and '50s lived their lives around and within their unions' struggles for decent wages, decent working conditions, an 8-hour day, and so forth). The focus of our strategies must be on building organizations that involve people and, in that process, finding new allies. The power to govern would naturally flow from those efforts.

This question of democracy is not trivial. It is deep. And it deeply divides the environmental movement, or rather movements plural. Many members of the mainstream environmental movement tend to view ordinary people as the enemy (for example, they love to point to Pogo saying, "We have met the enemy and he is us."). They fundamentally don't trust people to make good decisions, so they

prefer to leave ordinary people out of the equation. Instead, they scheme with lawyers and experts behind closed doors, then announce their "solution" (whatever it may be). Then they lobby Congress in hopes that Congress will impose this latest "solution" on us all.

Naturally, such people don't develop a big following and their "solutions" --even when Congress has been willing to impose them upon us --have often proven to be expensive, burdensome, and ultimately unsuccessful.

Since the days of the American Revolution, thoughtful people have recognized that our democracy depends decisively upon an informed citizenry. Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1820, "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion." And Franklin Roosevelt said in a fireside chat in 1938, "The only sure bulwark of continuing liberty is a government strong enough to protect the interests of the people, and a people strong enough and well enough informed to maintain its sovereign control over its government."

In the modern era, open democratic decision-making is essential to survival. Only by informing people, and trusting their decisions, can we survive as a human society. Our technologies are now too complex and too powerful to be left solely in the hands of a few experts. If they are allowed to make decisions behind closed doors, small groups of experts can make fatal errors. One thinks of the old Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) justifying above-ground nuclear weapons testing. In the early 1950s, their atomic fallout was showering the population with strontium-90, a highly-radioactive element that masquerades as calcium when it is taken into the body. Once in the body, strontium-90 moves into the bones, where it irradiates the bone marrow, causing cancer. The AEC's best and brightest studied this problem in detail and concluded that raining strontium-90 over the prairies of mid-America would not hurt anyone. They argued in secret memos that the only way strontium-90 could get into humans would be through cattle grazing on contaminated grass. They calculated the strontium-90 intake of the cows, and the amount that would end up in the cows' bones. Then they carefully measured the tiny slivers of bone fragments found in a typical hamburger. On that basis, the AEC reported to Congress in 1953, "The only potential hazard to human beings would be the ingestion of bone splinters which might be intermingled with muscle tissue in butchering and cutting of the meat. An insignificant amount would enter the body in this fashion." [4] Thus, they concluded, strontium-90 was not endangering people.

The following year, in 1954, Congress declassified many of the AEC's deliberations. As soon as these memos became public, scientists and citizens in St. Louis began asking, "What about the cow's milk?" The AEC scientists had no response. They had neglected to ask themselves whether strontium-90, mimicking calcium, would contaminate cows' milk, which of course it did. These particular AEC experts were not permitted to make decisions in secret for very long, and the world community soon put an end to above-ground nuclear weapons tests, formalizing a treaty 35 years ago. (Recently even China and France seem to have grasped the wisdom of this approach.) However, secrecy in government and corporate decision-making continues to threaten the well being of everyone on the planet as new technologies are deployed at an accelerating pace after inadequate consideration of their effects. Only by informing people broadly, and trusting their decisions, can we survive as a human society. Open democratic decision-making is no longer a luxury. In the modern world, it is a necessity for human survival.

For democracy to work, the economy needs to serve our democratic goals as well. It seems obvious that the overriding purpose of the economy is to serve the basic human needs of everyone according

to a widely-shared standard of fairness. But increasingly our own U.S. economy is violating this principle. Five percent of the people are making out like bandits, 40% are doing well, yet the majority are increasingly excluded from the cornucopia, abandoned to fight among themselves over the crumbs. And the chasm between rich and poor is continuing to widen.

MIT economist Lester Thurow has observed, "No country not experiencing a revolution of a military defeat with a subsequent occupation has probably ever had as rapid or as widespread an increase in inequality as has occurred in the United States in the past two decades." [3]

No one is advocating equal distribution of income and wealth. Some people want to work harder than others and they deserve greater rewards for their efforts. However, it is obvious that all wealth is ultimately derived from, and dependent upon, the community. Bill Gates alone did not create the wealth that is now the Microsoft Corporation. With hard work and a measure of luck, Mr. Gates cleverly combined technical details and capacities that he inherited from the larger society that came before him. These centuries of accumulated development are the community's bequest to each of us, and they are what allows us to create wealth. Individual entrepreneurs are important, but wealth is largely created by the community, not by individuals. Each member of the community, therefore, has a just claim on a fair portion of the benefits of the economy.

Citizens who cannot share in the benefits of the economy can rarely participate in democratic decision-making and the republic is weakened accordingly. Furthermore, if a large segment of society is cut off from the benefits of the economy, this breeds envy, distrust, animosity and ultimately fear and danger for everyone. It weakens the fabric that makes one out of many (e pluribus unum, as it says on U.S. coins). A broad distribution of wealth and of human development should be the goal of our economy because it is morally and ethically right, because it will bring the greatest good to the greatest number, and because it is the only way to preserve our most important ideal --our democracy, without which we will surely lose our liberty.

A recent manifesto has caught my attention. It is called BUILDING THE BRIDGE TO THE HIGH ROAD by Dan Swinney who runs the Midwest Center for Labor Research in Chicago. It seems to me that it's an important new statement of how we might achieve some of our fundamental goals. And it just might offer the environmental movement new perspectives on ways to stop treading water and get moving again. You can get a copy from the world wide web --www.mclr.com, though you have to download it in 14 sections and reassemble them into one piece. You can also order a paper copy for \$10 from MCLR, Room 10, 3411 W. Diversy, Chicago, IL 60647; phone (773) 278-5418. Next week, we'll look into Dan's promising manifesto.

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[1] For example, see Antonin Kratochvil and Marlise Simons, "Eastern Europe, The Polluted Lands," NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE April 29, 1990, pgs. 31-35.

[2] William Sanjour and Stephen M. Cohen, ENVIRONMENTAL WHISTLEBLOWERS: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES (Annapolis, Maryland: Environmental Research Foundation, 1994). And see REHW #484.

[3] Lester Thurow, THE FUTURE OF CAPITALISM (New York: William Morrow, 1966), pg. 42.

[4] H. Peter Metzger, THE ATOMIC ESTABLISHMENT (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pgs. 93-94, quoting the 13TH SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT OF THE AEC [TO CONGRESS] dated January 28, 1953.

Descriptor terms: democracy; economy; inequality; wealth; poverty; strontium-90; nuclear weapons;