

The last refuge of scoundrels

Study commissions are a cynical joke in Washington, where they are piously proposed in the face of pressing problems, and generally looked upon, except by those specialists who serve on them, as a comfortable substitute for action.

And the number of issues researched to death—or at least to a standstill—in recent years is more than matched by the number of disillusioned scientists, social scientists, university professors, retired governors, businessmen and other specialists who conducted studies and disappeared into an official obscurity almost as deep as the dust covering the fruits of their labors.

This has been the case in such areas, to name only a few, as the landmark Kerner Commission report and its successors on crime and violence, the effort to control lead pollution, drug abuse, drug regulation, smoking and health, the draft and campus violence.

So it is bemusing at least to see the sides of the fence occupied during a recent debate before the American Chemical Society by Dr. Barry Commoner of Washington University in St. Louis and Dr. Lee A. DuBridge, science adviser to President Nixon.

Dr. Commoner is an outspoken ecologist and environmentalist who has all but spent his reputation among his colleagues in the effort to warn of the ecological dangers the technological revolution has spawned.

Dr. DuBridge is science's man in the bureaucracy.

DuBridge contends that the technology of effective pollution control is available and that the implementation of what is known could go a long way toward forestalling disaster.

Commoner argues correctly that the best that modern treatment plants can do is break down sewage into its chemical components—largely nitrates and phosphates—nutrients which upset the ecological balances in waterways.

But the inference from Commoner's argument that other, more thorough control techniques must be found to replace the known techniques of water pollution control—while correct—plays dangerously into the hands of the foot-draggers on pollution control.

DuBridge's position, in favor of less thorough but more immediate action, would result in an environment less clean than Commoner demands, but cleaner than the one in which we now live.

Ever since 1965, when under pressure from Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Me.) the Federal Water Pollution Control Administration became for a short time a free-swinging, semi-independent entity, it has been fighting an uphill battle. Much of its independence was lost when President Johnson transferred it into the Department of Interior, which has more industrial constituents than regulatory fervor or experience. And its freedom to force the implementation of known control technology has yet to be reestablished.

The arguments against action, which have all but paralyzed the regulators, have been that the money is not available, that the levels of purity required by law are unnecessarily high and, in the case of the wood-pulp industry, even that the nutrient-rich effluents that pour out of its plants enrich the ecology of the streams they pollute—an argument no ecologist would buy.

But not until now have polluters had much authority on which to build a science-based argument for more research as a prerequisite to the action DuBridge says is possible now.

Commoner's argument, even though not his whole argument, seems to provide this.

It would be more valid were pollution a distant problem and his science sophisticated enough to foresee it and forestall it.

But as DuBridge's tenure within the bureaucracy has taught him, in the face of an already-present crisis it is necessary to do while the pressure is on what can be done with the tools at hand, even if they are imperfect.

It does mean that the elimination of noxious pollution by existing techniques will leave, as Commoner foresees, a residue of ecological problems that will have to be dealt with. And research on ways to deal with them developed at the same time.

But by even seeming to offer research as a necessary precursor to action, Commoner is inviting some strange fellows into his bed.

For where strong measures, which he advocates, are necessary protection for society, which he favors, research can be the last refuge of scoundrels. And he does not belong among them.

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