

A PUBLIC VIEW OF MAN VS ENVIRONMENT
by
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I am happy to find that your program committee has cast me in the role of the man on the street, Mr. Public. In this star studded gathering of experts on every aspect of our environment, I would be speechless if you had given me any other assignment.

As it is, I feel something less than confident. It is no mean task to represent the 180 million people who make up that big American family who go by the name of Public, particularly on a subject as controversial as this one.

Talk about conflict of interest! In this field, everybody's interests seem to conflict and they fight like relatives over the will of a rich uncle.

There's the conservationist branch of the family - listen to some of them and you'd think they want to turn the clock back to the days of Daniel Boone.

There's the industrialist branch - sometimes you think their theme song is profits at any price, even health.

The Hatfields and McCoys were pacifists compared to those feuders.

Then, right in the middle, getting tomatoes from both sides, are the planners who want to fit us all into a neat little plan - whether we like it or not.

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And while everybody is fighting with everybody else, the worst features of our modern environment - the pollution, the noise, the traffic - the whole miserable mess of urban sprawl, dirty water, stinking air - go right on getting worse.

You asked me for the public's view. Briefly, this is it: We want action.

We want action on air pollution. Put controls on those auto exhausts that are poisoning the air. Cut down the sulphur-dioxide in city air. Studies by the Public Health Service in Nashville and elsewhere have shown a definite relationship between high levels of sulphur-dioxide and asthmatic attacks.

We want action on water pollution. Pollution has already turned some of our rivers into sewers and is now getting serious even in the ocean. Several areas along the New York-New Jersey coast had to be closed to the shellfish industry just last month because of pollution. Keep on the way we're going and fish will be so rare we'll have to visit an aquarium to see one. About 300 fishkills, destroying over six million fish, have been reported this past year - and a fishkill has to be pretty bad to get reported at all.

We want something done about food poisoning. About a million people become acutely ill from food poisoning every year. That is the number who get the kind of food poisoning we understand; the kind that makes you violently ill in just a few hours. But nobody knows how many people are affected by the unknown kind of food poisoning - by the slow, insidious effect of the additives, the insecticides and all the other chemicals that, one way or another, find their way into our food.

And nobody is trying very hard to find out. We still seem to be operating on the principle that what you don't know won't hurt you. In this radioactive age, that is a mighty dangerous principle. As I hear it, a person could be exposed to enough radiation to kill him without seeing, hearing or feeling a thing. That is frightening enough but it is even more frightening to know that all these invisible radioactive and chemical pollutants are entering our environment all the time without anybody keeping the score so that we'll know when they all add up to too much for the human body to take.

Sure, the auto industry does not want to kill us off - it will, though, if traffic gets much worse, if more health and safety features aren't built into cars and highways, and if people don't learn how to use them safely. The chemical, petroleum and other growing industries aren't going to kill us off either. We aren't even going to die from the unsightly mess the developers are making of our expanding urban areas. In other words, each contributor to our modern environment is careful to see that nothing he does causes obvious damage to health. But they don't get together. They don't get together with each other; they don't get together with you folks. That's why nobody knows what all this new pollution adds up to. And that's why nobody will be ready and able to put on the brakes if it finally adds up to disability and even premature death for the people who live in this mess.

From where I sit, bombarded with mail from all kinds of special interest groups, it looks to me as if there is just one hope for getting people together on this problem. There is one

area, and only one, where there is no conflict of interest and that area is health.

The industrialist is even more interested in health than he is in production and profits. The farmer hates illness even more than he hates insects. The planners and the conservationists know that their dreams of ideal environments are never going to be realized, but if health is to be the gauge of how far technology shall be allowed to affect the environment, they'll go along. They know they have more to gain by fighting under the health banner than by going it alone.

That's why I say health is the area where we have room to negotiate; where we have our best chance of getting a genuinely balanced and realistic program.

For that reason, in all the controversies about the Federal government's role in controlling water and air pollution, radiological and other environmental hazards, I've hewed to one line: keep the responsibility in the health field. That doesn't mean any lesser roles for the many agencies of Federal government that are and should continue to be increasingly active in environmental programs. But it does mean making health the paramount factor in determining control. It means that the Federal health agency - the Public Health Service - has ultimate responsibility for whatever Federal action is necessary to control pollution and other health hazards.

If all of us can agree that health is the compelling reason for exercising control over our environment, it seems obvious that we will get more done and get it done faster than if we waste time, money and talent in bickering over organizational structures.

In its years of work in this area, the Public Health Service has built up a nucleus staff of capable, dedicated men. From this nucleus can be developed the much more expansive programs the needs of the times demand.

At the blueprint stage now, for example, are plans to develop, in the environmental health field, research activity commensurate with the medical research activity that has stemmed from the National Institutes of Health.

What the National Institutes of Health has done to raise the whole scale of medical research in this Nation, I believe this new program can do for environmental research. To this audience, it would be presumptuous for me to discuss the urgent need for a stepped up research program or to point out that it will require Federal support. You know, as well or better than I do, why we need more research and why the Federal government must help to support it. The only question you might have is whether the development of a National Center is the best way to do it. I've heard some scientists say that the same amount of money, if given to existing university and other research centers, would get things moving faster. They also claim it would glamourize the schools of engineering and thus lure more students into environmental health careers.

I've looked into that proposal and it doesn't appear to me to be an either-or situation. Certainly money needs to go into the existing research centers, just as the National Institutes of Health is putting funds into medical research centers. But if the National Institutes of Health experience is any guide - and I think it is - the total research effort will be sounder if

there is also a strong Federally operated program. I just don't think you can give sound priorities to projects, avoid gaps and duplications, or build up an effective, nationwide crash program without having some cohesive force at the center. In other words, if we have a race to win - and I think you'll all agree that we have - let's not pick an octopus to win it with.

I believe we should have a National Center, comparable to the National Institutes of Health. In this Center you would have research workers - in air, water, chemicals, radiology - working together and often - especially in relation to basic research - on the same team. Scientists all over the country could use this central headquarters as a clearinghouse for information about work in their fields. It would be a training facility, a meeting facility, a resources facility; in brief, a central point of reference for the total national effort, something laymen as well as scientists could understand and be proud of. I believe that if you ask your colleagues in the schools of medicine, they will tell you that, quite apart from the financial support they get from the National Institutes of Health, the very existence of an N.I.H. has changed the whole pace and scope of medical research in this country. I think you'll find a National Environmental Health Center would do the same for you in your fields.

At least, that's my thinking now. Of course, such an Environmental Health Center is still just a gleam in the eye. No bricks and mortar have yet been laid. There is still time to give me and my colleagues in Congress your opinions. I'm especially interested in your views because I've been impressed

with your balanced approach to this whole problem. I like your goal of going as fast and as far as we can in technological progress, but paralleling this progress with advances in health protection.

I also see eye to eye with you, I believe, on the role of the Federal government. That role is and should be a limited one. States and communities have the primary responsibility for keeping their environs healthful. The Federal government should do only those things which cannot be done or cannot be done adequately without Federal support. Research - on the scale required - must be Federally aided. Enforcement action to prevent pollution calls for Federal participation when jurisdictional boundaries preclude effective State or local action. Financial aid for developing Statewide or regional plans, for river basin studies, and for other programming, that would probably never be done without the incentive of such aid, is also a justifiable field for Federal action. Demonstrations and other technical assistance is a legitimate field for Federal support, since the lessons learned can be applied to many communities.

The Public Health Service is already active in all these areas, but it can and will do more if we can get all the warring branches of the big family whom we call "the public" to unite under the banner of health. And if they unite, instead of pulling and tugging for their special interests, I think each branch will get most of what it wants.

Members of the Planner branch aren't going to get their ideal metro's of course, because cities are made up of people and people never fit neatly into blueprinted plans. But, though short of their ideal, tomorrow's cities are going to carry the mark of the planners for the simple reason that people are willing to compromise on their personal plans when they realize their health is at stake.

The nature lovers, sportsmen and other members of the Conservation branch will also get a little less than they dream of because neither they nor the rest of us Publics are really willing to give up cars, planes, household appliances and the other luxuries of modern life in exchange for virgin pure air and water. But with the growing realization of what wilderness vacations can do for our mental health and what smog covered cities can do to our physical health, the conservationists are going to find increasingly broad provisions made for bringing the environment much closer to purity than it is today.

And our cousins in industry - management and labor alike - know that money means little if health is lost.

The sponsors of this Conference listed as one of their goals, and I quote: "To consider principles and methods of practice which will encourage a maximum development of our environmental resources for society."

All of you, right here in this room, can make a big start toward achieving that goal. You are the voice of science. You know what you're talking about. Most of the rest of us just have to take your word for it. Once it is clear that you

have agreed to make optimum health your objective and that everything you advocate is related to this, the rest of us can get behind you.

Under the health banner, we can all fight on the same side - scientist, industrialist, conservationist, planner, farmer, politician - all of us.

Then and only then can we win battles against our real enemies - the hazards of our modern environment.

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