

The Ecologist, Charles Secrett - April 2000

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How do you think companies and corporate investors should be persuaded to develop environmentally sound and ethical policies and practices? What about the following ...

Passionate animal rights activists target City fund managers, who have invested in Huntingdon Life Sciences, Europe's largest contract research laboratory, with repeated bomb threats, warning them to withdraw or else. They do, and the shares plummet. The threats turn out to be a coordinated hoax. Justifiable direct action, or not?

Thousands of committed demonstrators march through the City of London, demanding that corporations and institutional investors curb capitalism's worst environmental and human excesses. Anger erupts, offices are trashed, windows smashed, the gathered police storm the protestors, horses and truncheons to the fore, and a riot ensues. The running street battle gets world-wide publicity for the cause. Justifiable direct action, or not?

Brave campaigners occupy beautiful wildlife sites along imminent road routes, tunnelling deep before the bulldozers move in. Spending weeks underground, or camped high in the trees, these peaceful protestors only delay the inevitable building. But their stand is vital in uniting a broad spectrum of communities, voters and public opinion against government policy and construction company practice. Some sites are lost, but their efforts join with campaigns run by other organisations to ensure that a nation-wide roads programme is dismantled, and companies rethink their approach to concreting over protected areas. Justifiable direct action, or not?

My answers on a post card are: No; No; Yes. So, why is this my view?

Governments and corporations cannot be trusted to exercise environmental protection and social justice responsibilities. That much is obvious. The world is hurting, because most politicians and captains of industry are more interested in ideology and money than doing what is right. Those positions cannot go unchallenged. Environmental and social justice campaigners, who confront the established powers-that-are, must continually make judgements about what is justifiable, effective opposition, and what is not.

In a democratic political economy, where the market is regulated, there are no circumstances where violent activism, or the threat of it, is either justified or effective. There are four main reasons why.

First, violence is tyranny. The violence of one person against another is the dictatorship of the individual, and, as it escalates, breeds a similar response from the State. As extremists target people, or their property with the threat of collateral damage to innocents, so government will act to safeguard the rights of those engaged in lawful pursuits. It may be ethically objectionable to vivisect animals, or pursue profits at the expense of nature and community, but it is usually legal. Confronted by violent protest, or circumstances where violence erupts, the State introduces tougher policing and more restrictive laws. Democracy narrows, and the rights of the active, aware citizen are curtailed. As long as the majority feel that this response is not disproportionate, the State, and the corporations it defends, win at the

expense of legitimate protest. Look at how the Public Order and Criminal Justice Acts are now tolerated. Violent activism is counterproductive.

Second, at this point, committed activists who believe violence is justified by the unethical actions of others does one of two things: either they continue with renewed effort, and the State similarly responds, or they give up. Giving up means defeat. Renewed violence simply brings forth tougher laws or tougher sentences. Think on how such animal activists have been jailed for very long terms. Their martyrdom is noticed only by the very few. The great majority are unperturbed. Either way, the objectionable behaviour of companies continues. Violent protest is self-defeating.

Third, two wrongs do not make a right, and, in a democracy, violence is wrong. What reasonable being, professing to defend life, can justify killing and maiming for the cause - and still claim either the moral high ground or their own democratic rights? It takes tremendous powers of self delusion to hold simultaneously such mutually contradictory positions. Extremists reduce themselves to the degraded status of those they despise. Violent campaigns are immoral campaigns.

Fourth, you don't need violence to win. The beauty of living in a democratic country, where companies are regulated, sufficient media are interested and citizens are educated, is that all the tools for peaceful change are already available. Companies do not make products that consumers ignore. No company continues with objectionable practices, if enough bad publicity occurs, or sufficiently prohibitive laws or tax regimes are enacted, or enough shareholders sell up, or enough investors say stop. Look at what happened to Monsanto.

In a democracy, it is the people - not companies or governments - who have the power to determine what goes on. The initial campaign challenge is to get the right information to the right people in the right way at the right time, so that they become aware of what goes on. Information is the first step to exercising power. The second is to act upon it effectively. That means creating campaign opportunities for citizens to use their knowledge as consumers, shareholders, voters, investors, workers, tax-payers or as peaceful protestors to shape what happens next. That, in turn, means building a critical mass of involved people. The third step is to channel that peaceful, democratic activism directly on company and government decision-makers, so that transformation occurs.

It works. In the past four years, Friends of the Earth have persuaded Tory and Labour Parliaments to pass over a dozen new environmental and conservation laws and regulations, which we first drafted. For Seattle, and the World Trade Organisation meeting, we were at the centre of building up the coalition of 1,700 citizen organisations world-wide who opposed further negotiations without fundamental reform. We intend using exactly the same methods to help transform the City, so that ethical investment practices become the norm - not the exception. It will take time; maybe twenty years. Critically, we will target the thirty or so individual pension funds and their managers who ultimately control what goes on - not with bombs, or even the threat of bombs, but with good information about problems, solutions and resulting profits, and by organising and mobilising enough volunteer citizens who cannot be ignored.

In our view, that is how to effectively turn wrongs into rights - and ensure democracy grows stronger not weaker by doing so.