

Bio-Encounter: Stop pollution

NOW!

By PAUL THOMSON

It should be obvious to most by now that pollution, as an issue, has lost a good deal of the appeal and emotion that it had when it first appeared. Or perhaps the few remain committed while the many don't generally give a damn, especially when they are called upon to do something.

The few showed up while the many stayed away from Vanier College's Bio-Encounter last Thursday. It consisted of six symposia on the "biosphere" and an after dinner speech by Prof. J. Livingston of York.

Tom Cohen and Ian Thompson, the organizers, felt that informal symposia would be the most valuable, so the panels responded to questions raised from the floor.

The men who sat on the atmosphere symposium were "experts in their fields". Their attitudes were consoling. Prof. H.N. MacFarland of York responded to a girl's criticism of Natural Science 176B by saving the course attempted to de-emotionalize the pollution issue by "trying to communicate knowledge" and "trying to get your geet on the ground."

Prof. I.A. Brookes of York criticized what he called the "disaster syndrome" in the media. He felt that people either had the impression that "scientists are scaring us again" or they hear an interview in which nothing is really said. He called for a middle ground of "informed radio and TV programmes".

Prof. M. Katz said that it is "inconceivable to think a real air pollution disaster could take place. If it did it would be politically dangerous". He called for common sense on the part of authorities. When a temperature inversion takes place, which traps polluted air over a city for several days, auto traffic and the burning of fuels should be minimized or dispensed with.

It was interesting to hear that in terms of the Toronto air pollution index, the London crisis of 1962 would have registered 580. Whether or not we should be alarmed over a danger level of 30-100 is therefore put into some perspective.

Dean H.I. Schiff of the Faculty of Science emphasized the complexity of the problem, its large political element and the need for one to filter out sensationalism, as did the other scientific gentlemen on the panel. Eighty per cent of the world's pollution comes from the United States. This pollution which results from the wastefulness and over-consumption of the "affluent society", Schiff dubbed "affluence".

This oft quoted figure, along with the fact that the U.S. consumes 50 per cent of the world's resources is no justification for Canadian smugness. For in opting for American life styles and copying American attitudes, Canada produces an almost equal amount of this "affluence" in relation to her much smaller population.

Despite the hypocrisy of our position, Canada along with other countries, is coming

"hands off our resources". The solution of course, as Prof. Katz pointed out, is a "complete change in the way things are used and they way we waste them" — in other words recycling of wastes. In this field, Western Europe is far ahead of us in our follow-the-leader position with respect to the United States.

The fifth member of the panel launched a vigorous defence of the automobile and so received most of the questions from the floor.

A.R. Scott of General Motors said that the latest figures in the United States disclose that in 1968, autos produced 41 per cent of the total weight of pollutants, but as for toxicity (harmfulness), their contribution was only 5-10 per cent.

Obviously this is an area where technical knowledge is important. It's hard for the layman to say whether these figures are really valid or whether, as it first appears, they represent a sophisticated scientific and corporate bamboozle.

Scott went on to say that he is optimistic about pollution control on cars. Already, he claimed, G.M. has reduced certain pollutants by up to 80 per cent. But Prof. Katz challenged him by pointing out that there is no control of oxides of nitrogen yet in car exhausts and that the toxicity of carbon monoxide has been shown to be more dangerous than previously thought.

At this point, Scott in effect laid G.M.'s cards on the table. He said he is not in favour of "over control"; exhaust pollution should be controlled only to the extent that is "necessary". When that point is reached, he felt that available resources should be devoted to something else. Because of the controls demanded by the U.S. authorities, by 1980-1990 pollution levels from cars will be down to 1940 levels, even though there will be more cars on the roads, Scott said.

All of this left quite a bit unsaid. To what should resources be devoted after car pollution is licked? Are 1940 pollution levels satisfactory? Scott couldn't say what G.M.'s advertising budget is for a year, but he said in 1970 G.M. spent \$116 million on "emission control equipment". Is, in fact the view at G.M. and other auto companies, that money diverted into emission control and safety features could be better spent on promotion and styling!

(G.M.'s profit last year was \$2,700 million).

After getting sidetracked into the health and pollution aspects of smoking, the panelists were asked about the giant smokestacks now being built to take pollutants higher into the atmosphere. Prof. MacFarland said that pollutants are rapidly dispersed in these stacks. They do not go up and "dump on the next city downwind".

Prof. Katz, who was involved in designing the highest stack in the world, now under construction at Sudbury, said that he did not advocate high stacks as the ultimate answer. But he pointed out that sulphur dioxide, the pollutant responsible for making the countryside around Sudbury look like the surface of the moon, could be controlled 100 per cent if a market could be found for the huge amount of sulphuric acid that would be produced.

It's apparent from this, that industry will make improvements only if it is "economically feasible".

One of the evening symposia was entitled "The Sociology of Waste — Saving the Human Aspect of Man". If one considers that in pollution, as in other areas, man is his own worst enemy, the questions raised by this approach are the basis of the problem. But the panelists and audience didn't succeed in nailing the topic down.

The discussions centred on the point Prof. M. Copeland of York raised — what are the costs of degrading the environment and what are we willing to pay to improve the situation.

Copeland declared himself pessimistic on changing man to become altruistic. The example he used suggests that the only way to improve conditions is by greater compulsion and social control. If one person spends \$100 on his car for emission control, he doesn't get \$100 worth of benefit in cleaner air. But if everyone spends \$100 then the benefits will be tangible. He pointed out that if people couldn't perceive their

buying car safety equipment, how can we make them perceive the larger social interest in pollution.

Dean of Environmental Studies at York, G.A.P. Carrothers, elaborated by saying that when the government banned phosphates from detergents, the consumer stopped this kind of damage to the environment at no cost to himself. But previous to the ban, few tried to seek out non-phosphate products.

Tom Cohen, speaking from the audience, interpreted these ideas as meaning that we should still deal with the consumer as "self-maximizing" and recycle wastes and institute more compulsion. As far as remedies are concerned, Cohen felt that vested interests have "immediate access" to political influence, but unorganized individuals who are concerned about pollution do not.

Bill Mercer, a York student involved in Pollution Probe, said that a lot depends on one's definition of self. An environmentalist sees himself as acting in his own self interest by fighting pollution. His "self definition" is thereby widened.

Man's apparent selfishness is misleading according to Prof. P. Medow of York. He doesn't act in this manner as a matter of nature but as a result of the situation he finds himself in, Medow said. The average man if not in a position to take into account certain things he might like to, given his economic situation such as a tight family budget.

There is, Medow felt, a chance for improvement in the present political system. The problem is that legislatures are not always enlightened enough about the options available.

Although Bio-Encounter did not offer very much encouragement to improve the situation, or re-assurance that the situation will actually improve before it gets worse, it was of value in offering a dispassionate appraisal of some of the problems involved. Because of scheduling one could attend only two of the six symposia. However, the discussions did broaden one's knowledge of pollution problems. It's only unfortunate that more of the "self-maximizing" members of York's affluent community did not attend.

Photo By Harry Kitz