

Dealing with the environment

by Sasha Aleksandar Bajagilovic

A group of students was made aware of a sobering problem November 9: our environment. We are daily exposed to an array of environmental issues. Unfortunately, we tend to passively ignore them. But the recent Pugwash meeting made the attending group aware of the severe state that our environment is really in.

This new club, brought to York by Don Maclean, attempts to make individuals from all walks of life aware of the current issues in science and technology. The meetings encourage the discussion of the social and ethical implications of science and technology. Pugwash's main aim is to promote the responsible use of science in society. Unfortunately, we might just be too late.

Pugwash itself is the name of a small town in Nova Scotia. This is where 22 scientists from the East and West met in 1957 to discuss the role and responsibilities of scientists in the arms race. The two men who started this concept of concern are Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell. But unfortunately, scientists do not make the best politicians. As a result, they have had very little control in shaping government policies concerning the environment.

The topic of discussion dealt with "our poisoned world" and our environmental status. The panel featured two of York's faculty members, Trevor Hancock and Dr. David Logan. The picture they painted of our environment was quite disturbing. Not only did they reveal the problems that we face today and tomorrow, but the extent of the damage we have already committed and the unlikelihood that we will ever return to a condition that existed just a hundred years ago.

We are only superficially aware of most of the environmental problems that we face today. But to hear the extent of the problem from a reliable source makes a solution to this global problem more urgent. These problems extend from acid rain and the depletion of the ozone layer to the destruction of our rain forests and our water supply.

Acid rain is destroying our lakes, rivers and forests. We know where it coming from and how to stop it. But jobs are more important to regions where the factory is the major employer

Our agricultural lands are being destroyed by bad agricultural practices. The extensive use of chemicals in agriculture has exhausted the soil's natural ability to recover. This is a direct result of our expectations when we go to the grocery store.

Our rain forests are being depleted at an alarming rate. In the Amazon Basin, alone, 10,000 acres of forest are being chopped down every day. Our water supply is being polluted by sewage and chemicals because of our lifestyles. So much so that very few lakes near urban areas are capable of supporting healthy aquatic life. As Logan was saying, there are cans of Budweiser floating around in the oceans.

Then there is our most recent concern, the ozone layer — the thin sheet of protection we have against the sun's ultraviolet light, which now has huge holes in it in the earth's polar regions. Hancock stated that this is probably the most sinister problem facing us today. Not only is it raising global temperature, but new evidence shows, it is also killing off the plankton in the world's oceans. This is the world's major source of oxygen.

If this isn't enough to make you depressed, there is also the

problem of chemicals. Once thought to be beneficial, we are now discovering some of the detrimental effects that some of these chemicals are having on our environment, as well as ourselves. As Hancock pointed out, if you took a piece of fat from any person's body and shipped it to a lab, you would probably find a whole array of chemicals, including DDTs and PCBs; chemicals that you would not have found in the human body a hundred years ago.

This is the complexity that faces scientists today. Technology and science are developing at an incredible rate. As Logan was pointing out, the effects of chemicals on humans takes many years of research to discover. This time consuming procedure has left scientists about 25 years behind in discovering the effects of certain chemicals on humans. Questions like, what are the safe levels of these chemicals and what effect do they have on us when many of them are combined, must be answered by scientists. But it is a very complex business, one that continues to challenge scientists.

These problems are not very easily solved. We have tried simplistic solutions before. As a result, we have found that these simple solutions lead to even more problems than we started off with. Environmental problems do not stem from a single source, as well, they have been with us for several hundred years. We cannot expect to rid ourselves of acid rain or polluted waters overnight. It will take time and patience as well as personal sacrifice, both financially and materialistically.

So who should we blame? Do we blame industry, politicians or ourselves? If we blame industry for our environmental predicament then we must not forget that we are the ones that buy their products and work in their factories. We could blame the politicians, but we put them there in the first place. To blame ourselves would seem futile. For, as individuals, we seem to think that we do very little damage to the environment as a whole. This may be true, but as a group, these three factors contribute to the overall destruction of the environment.

So, what are the solutions? First of all, society must change its ways. As Hancock told us, "The hardest thing to clean up is the socio-economic system we are so firmly attached to." We can start off with the products we buy. Everytime you buy something you vote for that product. Pick the products that are safe for you and your environment. You can pressure your representatives in government to take genuine action towards environmental issues. Tell them it's important to you and that you're over eighteen.

And, yourself become more aware and be better informed. There are many good publications available. Hancock made us aware of three of these: *Our Common Future*, *State of the World* and *GAIA*.

Unfortunately, this is a local view to a global problem. We cannot tell a developing country, for example to stop its industrialization programmes. Countries like Brazil cannot be concerned with their environment when every level of government is bankrupt. We have to make certain sacrifices in order to make the developing countries see things our way.

As a result of the complexity and severity of the situation, both Hancock and Logan are very pessimistic about the future. But there is a little bit of optimism in them. As Logan said, we are far more resilient than most pessimists think. Let's hope he's right. Let's get involved. A good place to start is by coming to the next Pugwash meeting. If you care about tomorrow, think about it today.

Che Guevara continued

economic progress lay in the need for growing political and economic consciousness.

Guevara studied socialism extensively and spent 1959 and 1960 travelling through socialist countries to learn about their economics and industries. Afterward, he refused to import these thoughts into Cuba. Tablada called this Guevara's first "heresy."

Guevara saw great defects in foreign socialist systems, Tablada explained. Rather than have a society in which, he believed, man was motivated by money, Guevara wanted a socialist system which paid attention to the masses. As Tablada's book states, "People must feel that what they're doing is useful, there must be an internal motivation."

To implement Guevara's system required a spontaneous, conscious socialist revolution. As Tablada explained, this would bring a change, in which men would relate to each other, becoming "emancipated from alienation."

He explained that "... education is needed that will get rid of selfishness and the lack of human solidarity." The key, Tablada explained, was "an education through culture, the essence of a new economy."

Continuing on this vein, Tablada emphasized, "There must be a policy of not closing the door. Socialism can only be built with free men and women; it must be voluntary."

In response to a question asking what went wrong in the 70s, Tablada described a Cuba in which "serious errors were made. We stopped, for many years, thinking about the thoughts of Che. We started to copy the Soviet economic system. Then, the things that Che warned about began to happen; there was a corruption of the working class and some leaders. People began to take advantage of the system."

According to the book's preface, "material incentives were being abused. [Cuba] was beginning to fall into a trend that would undermine the revolutionary spirit, the consciousness of workers..."

Upon realizing this, a "rectification process" began, reinstating Guevara's principles. As Tablada states in the book, the ongoing process exists to "increase the efficiency of the economy; to unite political and social elements; to unite all events in the country; and to eliminate corruption and vices."

This process, Tablada argued, will force Cuba to build more schools, child care facilities and churches. "They were stopped because these institutions were not making money," he explained. "The people stopped realizing that the most important part of a society is the human being."

Due to the massive campaign of 1961, Cuba has virtually eliminated illiteracy. The country now enjoys such benefits as health care, child care, land for the poor, mechanized sugar production and farming co-operatives.

"In my country," said Tablada, "there are no beggars or people living in the streets like in other Latin American countries. There are 35 universities, where there used to be three. The life expectancy has increased from 56 years, at the time of the revolution, to 74. The infant mortality rate has greatly decreased." He attributes all of this to Guevara's ideas. "The revolution," he explained, "gave dignity back to the people."

While one can argue whether all these benefits are due to socialism, one thing cannot be denied; Cubans are living in a society where they are not only denied democracy, but the freedom of speech as well.

In reply to a question about this aspect of Guevara's beliefs, Tablada explained that "Any people who have weapons in their hands can overthrow any government they do not like." He told a story of how his son carries a gun to school every day, "where they are guarded by students, not soldiers."

"Fidel has visited the school three times since my son has been there and nothing has happened. The people love Fidel, the name Fidel does not stand for one man, but for a collective."