

OUR politicians complain of public apathy. Meetings held during the last General Election were usually badly attended. In many country districts even the appearance of a Cabinet Minister only produced a handful of listeners, and the platform party often outnumbered the audience. It was surprising to find recently in the Huntingdonshire village of Warboys that when the Parish Council called a meeting to discuss the proposal to turn a clay pit on the edge of the village into a dump for toxic wastes, more than 500 people representing every section of the population, turned up.

Concern for conservation of the environment is usually a middle-class, rather elitist preoccupation, and the mass of the population is either apathetic or hostile. Attempts to save ancient buildings, even those of sufficient merit to be "listed" by the Department of the Environment, may be criticised by local councillors who state that these ruins would be better pulled down and replaced by supermarkets, bingo halls or public conveniences. There is little support from all but a minority for setting up nature reserves. It is generally believed that there is little support for spending public funds on such activities as improved sewage works. The Warboys meeting suggests that this last assumption may be wrong, and that there may indeed be votes in sewage.

The Warboys affair is a complicated story. The London Brick Company operates a small works there, using clay dug out of nearby ground. This has produced a deep pit covering about 30 acres. Such holes are now valuable, as our affluent society finds it increasingly difficult to get rid of many types of waste. London Brick has several other holes, and operates a waste tip in Bedfordshire under the somewhat significant trade name of "Easidispose". The company applied for planning permission to use the Warboys pit for the disposal of refuse, including poisonous wastes. This was opposed by the Parish

Council, but it was overruled by the County Planning Committee which gave planning permission, though only under stringent conditions aimed at protecting the local environment.

The people of Warboys were not satisfied. Like other citizens of the old county of Huntingdonshire, which was engulfed in Cambridgeshire on April 1, 1974, they were suspicious of the new authority, and complained that they were being used as a dump—no similar scheme existed in Cambridge-

Votes in sewage?



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shire, which sent its toxic wastes to Pitsea in Essex. Notwithstanding assurances from the county staff, they were not convinced that the dump would be safe. The information provided by London Brick about the substances to be dumped gave them little reassurance, for the list resembled the answer to a parliamentary question prepared by a wily civil servant, in that it was true but at the same time said almost nothing. It gave full details of comparatively harmless chemicals, and then such meaningless information as "sludges from wash-pits" and "heavy metals".

The meeting was addressed by county staff and London Brick officials. I was myself involved at the request of

the Parish Council. Having heard of all the precautions to be taken, I asked the company's spokesman if he could give an assurance that the tip would never harm the environment of Warboys. I added that there was cause for concern, as I had visited the Bedfordshire Easidispose dump, having been told by villagers living nearby that it made their life a misery. I said that the dump stank, had poor security and so was a danger to trespassing children—would that at Warboys be better? Very honestly, an official of London Brick refused to give me the assurance I sought. He also reproved me severely, saying that he was surprised that someone of my standing had not approached his company so as to be shown what really went on in its dump. This brought the house down.

For three hours the villagers questioned the officials and the company's representatives. Although the answers were frank, and answered many of the specific worries, the audience remained hostile. When the Chairman of the Parish Council put the matter to the vote, not one single citizen supported the motion that they were satisfied with what they had heard. They all agreed to continue their opposition to the establishment of the dump.

There are lessons to be learned from this affair. We all want to get rid of our waste—but only in some one else's parish. Are we doing enough to reduce the problem, and should we be recycling more materials even when this does not seem to be economic? The main lesson, however, is that the ordinary people *are* concerned about some factors in their environment. If those of us who have been involved with the less popular topics such as old buildings and wildlife can show that we are equally concerned with mundane issues like refuse dumps, then we may be able to recruit a much wider section of the population into the conservation movement. We need them if we are to preserve our, and their, environment.

waste itself. So, all in all, there will be very little foreign material remaining in the "dustbin".

There are other reasons, quite apart from the statistics, why Britain should wish to undertake the reprocessing of foreign nuclear fuels. First, there is a strong political argument. The Japanese approached BNFL in the first place because their own government will grant licences to operate nuclear plant only if provision can be made to reprocess irradiated fuel. Like virtually every other developed nation Japan is now committed to the development of nuclear power as an energy source, at least for the next

couple of decades.

In those circumstances there is really very little reason why Britain, which not only has almost 25 years of valuable and highly regarded experience in the reprocessing field but is also a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, should discourage a move which ensures that Japan does not develop the wherewithal independently to obtain plutonium and, thus, nuclear weaponry.

There are also sound financial reasons why Britain should continue the negotiations. The fuel which the Japanese hope to send to Windscale will come from American designed

boiling water and pressurised water reactors. Like the latest generation of British reactors, these use uranium oxide rather than metallic uranium. Although the existing facilities at Windscale can reprocess only the latter type of fuel, used by magnox reactors, it is expected that the deal will include a Japanese downpayment of at least £100 million towards the cost of a new £300 million oxide reprocessing plant that Britain will in any case need for her own requirements in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, the final outcome of this latest controversy over what has become something of a hardy perennial in Britain remains to be seen. □