COMMENTARY/

GREEN MATTERS

by Bernard Dixon

About a year ago, a radio producer who was planning a program on the release of engineered organisms into the environment contacted me. Concerned about proposals to deploy modified baculoviruses against pests in Scottish pine forests, she had become deeply puzzled. The problem was this: A spokesman for Friends of the Earth (FoE) in Glasgow had expressed horror at the very idea of viruses being disseminated amidst the conifer-skirted lochs and bens of his beloved homeland. But when the producer approached FoE's headquarters in London, the response was very different. "Actually," Spokesman Number Two said, "we rather favor this sort of biological control. It's far better than splashing toxic chemicals around."

Whether I was any help in resolving the puzzle, I do not know. But the conclusion was quite clever. In marked contrast to previous well-informed and highly effective campaigning against nuclear power, FoE had simply not got its act together on this particular issue. As with the British Labor Party's defense policy at the last general election, the organization was in a state of embarrassingly transparent disagreement with itself.

Much has changed in the U.K. over the past 12 months. Firstly, the Prime Minister has been converted to green causes, which she adumbrated in a major speech at the Royal Society. This came as a considerable surprise to her political opponents, who had long criticized her government—and continue to criticize it today—for lack of practical progress on issues such as the reduction of marine pollution and the improvement of water quality. Nevertheless, Mrs. Thatcher's Damascus Road remains an event of some political significance.

Arguably as meaningful is the other sea change in Britain during recent times—the rise from virtually nowhere of the Green Party, which polled 15 percent of the votes in elections to the European Parliament earlier this year. The rapid emergence of the Greens owes much to the ignominious collapse of the (greenish) Liberal-Socialist Democratic alliance which had occupied the center ground after spectacularly winning a third of the popular vote a couple of years earlier. The question now is whether the Greens, newly arrived on the national stage, will be able to evolve a coherent political strategy and consolidate their position accordingly, or whether their thunder will in turn be stolen by the two main political parties.

Judging by their annual conference, which took place in triumphalist mode recently, the Greens still have a very long way to go. On population, the merest scraps of media exposure were enough for the party to shelve its proposal to halve the number of inhabitants of Britain. On defense, plans to abolish nuclear weapons overnight, leave the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and cut military spending "to the bone" remain to be worked out in detail. The same applies to the Greens' intention of terminating all uses of animals in medical research and safety screening (although former professional footballer David Icke, now a television commentator and Greens spokesman, has

announced that "We do not even need to *think* about that one...").

On import controls, job cuts, severance from international banking, and the reduction of economic growth to zero, we still await detailed analysis and presentation. And on the need to coerce those citizens of Britain who, after careful explanation and diligent study, still disagree with these and other Draconian policies, there has been little more than coy silence. Even the toughest television inquisitors have been unable to penetrate the niceness that unquestionably characterizes most Green interviewees, to find out what they would really do in the face of widespread skepticism and resistance.

As a seismographic guide to the essential character of U.K. Greens, however, we have to study the party's handling of the issue that has generated more fury than any other on the agenda of their recent conference. More tangible than trade tariffs, more comprehensible than defense technology, more immediate than global warming, that issue is the role of the supermarket in British society—nay, the entire global economy. Despite a frenetic debate, it is by no means easy to determine what represents correct thinking on this matter.

On the one hand, the Green Party's emergence in Britain has been accompanied by the vigorous growth of green consumerism. "Power to the people" could be the slogan for this movement, which seeks to inform citizens about the ecological merits and demerits of particular brands of deodorants and washing powders, oven cleaners, and breakfast cereals, and to ensure that supermarkets stock only appropriate varieties. The combined weight of prudent buying decisions by customers and corresponding actions by store managers and manufacturers will, the reasoning goes, produce major shifts toward a sustainable pattern of global housekeeping. To that end, prominent Greens have stepped forward with a wealth of educative books, newspaper columns, and magazine articles.

Unfortunately, other prominent Greens have now decided that supermarkets themselves are nasty, that making money out of consumerism is wicked, and that enlightened consumers are just as exploited as unenlightened ones. "Supermarkets by their very structure are totally un-Green," insisted Icke at the conference. At this point, all hell broke loose. The matter was not resolved and, if anything, the infighting three months later is sharper than ever.

What is being described here, of course, is a vignette of greenery and consumerism in one country. My conclusion, nevertheless, is relevant to science-based industry generally—that such movements contain inherent contradictions, and that these will have to be resolved if they are ever to command majority support, or even to wield real influence over other political parties. And this means that they themselves can be influenced. The institutions of science would do well to eschew hostility and ridicule towards greenery, and to engage instead in constructive dialogue.