

TOXIC POLICIES

On September 24, the EU council of ministers permanently banned a family of organic chemicals, called phthalates, from use in toys and childcare items. This 'political agreement' brought to an end five years of debate about their toxicity. During that time, the European Commission maintained a series of temporary, emergency bans, despite existing and new evidence that consistently and increasingly opposed the official view.

Banning phthalates, a family of organic compounds used to soften PVC, is unexceptional. It appeared almost reasonable, once concerns had been raised as to their possible impact upon infants, to pursue a course characterised by caution and further research. Their removal from the market place is unlikely to damage the companies that produced them. →

But such concerns reflect a growing cautionary climate, which paved the way for the new European chemicals regulation strategy - REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals). Now, thousands of chemicals, which have been used for over twenty years, face a battery of toxicological tests, despite billions of hours of exposure data as to their impact.

Again, it seems sensible to make testing mandatory. It may surprise some to learn that chemicals in use from before 1981 may not have been subjected to toxicity or carcinogenicity tests. But tests are unlikely to resolve matters. The UK Medical Research Council Institute for Environment and Health has described them as unfeasible and unnecessary.

This is because such tests will be performed on a precautionary basis. There is no evidence of harm. Rather, it is the constant demand for reassurance that is damaging. REACH will require vast resources, not least in terms of animal-testing, it will be unable to address all possible concerns, and it will drive consumer fears rather than assuaging them.

These developments have been shaped more by political context than scientific content. In the early 1990s, the European Commission services went through a major reorganisation in the aftermath of the BSE debacle. A cautionary outlook was adopted which advocated pre-emptive strikes in situations of uncertainty. This, 'precautionary principle', requires the use of worst-case scenarios in scientific decision-making.

The advent of this preventative paradigm both reflected and amplified broader trends in society. A proclivity to speculate about what might be, now dominates over examination of what actually is. Caution requires extrapolating from uncorroborated or anecdotal evidence - just in case. This allows anecdote and rumour to shape our

lives. Hence, the growing call to regulate, not just chemicals, but all-manner of products and activities, old and new, from child's play to vaccines.

The real driver behind our insecurities is the political disengagement and social alienation that dominates contemporary life. As people no longer form active networks as they did before, so their tolerance and trust in authority, whether political, corporate or scientific has waned. Subjective impressions of reality go un-moderated, growing into all-consuming worldviews not open to reasoned interrogation.

Above-all, this process has been facilitated by the political, corporate and scientific elites themselves who, lacking any vision of their own, have willingly repackaged themselves as societal risk-managers. Sensing their growing isolation from those they depend upon for their authority, so these now offered to protect us from our fears. An alienated and fearful public are the flip-side of the isolated and purposeless elite.

Accordingly, the specifics of particular issues are only a small part of what shapes these debates. Campaigners complain about minute traces of persistent chemicals found inside their bodies, extrapolating from experiments on rodents, which not only have different metabolisms, but are subjected to huge doses over long periods, precisely to see the worst that could happen. They are driven more by their sense of alienation from the decision-making process than by real risk.

Many concerns, such as those regarding endocrine disrupting chemicals (substances that can affect hormones), are best described as conclusions in search of data. Despite a British Royal Society report noting such chemicals can be beneficial, and despite the fact that there are millions of times as many such substances in our foods as in other chemicals we are exposed

to, the decision to assume the worst now drives policy.

Notably, it is the authorities who are driving this agenda. Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and WWF are mere catalysts. It is the European Commission, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and even chemical manufacturers themselves who, desperate to connect with what they presume to be public opinion, promote precautionary policies.

Far from stabilising matters and reassuring the public, such actions drive public concerns and shape a more unstable regulatory environment. Policy determined on the basis of opinion polls is hardly fixed. Rather than challenging the public with evidence and explaining how social isolation shapes insecurity leading to regulatory demands, our leaders, lacking any direction of their own, pander to social fears by appearing to provide protection.

Ironically, an obsession with precaution alarms people needlessly, diverting social resources and distracting us from more likely risks. But the drive to be seen to be taking precautions determines all. It has allowed some to pose as champions of consumer welfare, of animals, the environment or future generations, despite their being unelected, and unable to represent the dumb, the inanimate and the unborn.

By raising problems at a time, when such issues are in decline, and by positing widespread tests that are neither desirable nor achievable, they make matters worse rather than better. And by adopting politically-expedient, yet ultimately intellectually cowardly policies, they display their ultimate contempt for those that they claim to be fighting for.

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