Hodgson's Choice

An air of professional detachment?

Sir Tom Blundell

What can an expert in medical crystallography contribute to sophisticated discussions on environmental policy? Simon Hodgson asks Sir Tom Blundell, the Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution.

"I hope you don't mind rushing", says Sir Tom Blundell over breakfast, "but I have to chair the Royal Commission at 9:00." He declines coffee, knowing that by the end of the full-day's meeting he will have drunk more cups than is good for him. "The Royal Commission is really like taking a new university degree every year", he says, and I find myself wondering whether the analogy extends to student-level consumption of caffeine.

It's a day of intense discussion ahead, with a dozen intellectual heavyweights brought together to thrash out the knottiest of environmental dilemmas, and Sir Tom has the responsibility of keeping the whole thing on track. Around the table are usually "a lawyer, a moral philosopher, two economists, two sociologists, a climatologist, an ecologist and a couple of people from industry", he says, which all sounds broadly sensible. But he himself made his name in medical crystallography and holds a chair in Biochemisrty at Cambridge. What brings him to the field of environment?

"The tradition of the Royal Commission is to have someone who has made some contribution to science and to involve them not as an expert on environmental matters, but as part of a committee of experts", he explains. So his principal contribution is that he doesn't know anything about the subject? He agrees that it's fairly challenging, but manageable, "as long as one starts off with the assumption that one doesn't know the answer – which is not a very difficult assumption." He continues, "One is always insecure, but that gives me greater respect for the views coming in": an excellent attribute for a chairman.

The Commission was established in 1970 to advise the Queen, government, Parliament and the public on environmental issues. Its second report, published in 1972 had the catchy title "Three issues in Industrial Pollution" and dealt with industrial effluents, the tipping of dangerous waste on land and 'greater understanding of the impact of new chemical products'. As the agenda has moved on, so has the Commission, which is now grabbing headlines with its views on GMOs, climate change and the planning process. Isn't it odd that three of the Commission's last four Reports haven't really examined 'pollution' in the conventional sense? "We keep the name because it's a brand" admits Blundell "we're really commenting on the environmental component of sustainability".

Much has changed in its thirty years, but some things haven't. The Commission's most recent report returns to the 30,000 chemicals used in everyday manufacturing without any comprehensive testing on the risks they pose, the very topic it covered back in 1972. "There are flame retardants in just about everything you sit on, biocides in your chopping board and in your toothpaste, there are other chemicals in children's toys, and most of them, nobody has ever tested at all", Blundell cautions.

I am interested that the RCEP is there to advise 'the public'. Its Reports usually run to 200 pages and are fearsomely complex. How can this inform the average Joe? "I always think about it", Blundell agrees, "at every stage of the Report. I ask myself what I'm going to do when the TV interviewer says 'OK' and we start walking, and I know I've got to explain the 200 pages in the next ten paces." This is apparently a reference to the standard TV interview, in which Blundell is invited to walk across St Stephen's Green, with the Houses of Parliament in the background, talking all the while. The format, it seems, is so well established that it allows for detailed practice. "This year, on the chemicals Report, I must have walked with colleagues about thirty times across the room trying to work out the two sentences that would communicate".

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These are enormously complex issues, with environmental and public health risks being weighed against costs and benefits, and often relying on data at the very limits of scientific knowledge. "The problem is getting over to a public, that is used to scientists making definitive statements, the idea that your policy recommendation does have a degree of uncertainty", he says.

If anyone understands this interface between science and policy, it should be Sir Tom, who has spent much of his career operating there. After making his name as a scientist, he ran the Agricultural and Food Research Council and then the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. He is politically committed (although "inactive" while he chairs the RCEP) and was heavily involved in local politics as a young man, even actively considering a wholly political career until science claimed him. Does he feel able to stand up to Ministers? He recalls one particular argument after Lord Falconer had endured a brutal interview on Radio 4, but in general "We're totally free", he confirms, "this is the closest to real debate and collective thinking, that I've ever experienced. I've never felt restrained."

He clearly loves the job; the unfettered deliberative debate, the intellectual quality of his peers and the demanding complex arguments. But does his objectivity borders on detachment? What is his personal stance on the issues? "I'm a scientist", he says, "and I'm sensitive to the need to get people involved in making decisions" which is not quite an answer. I press again "I'm probably less environmentally conscious than I should be", he admits, but is "becoming more sensitised."

No, I conclude, Sir Tom Blundell's first loyalty is not to the environmental cause but he is absolutely committed to the process - to the quest for understanding and the search for answers - and in the end, that's his job.

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