

## Academic or activist?



Robin Grove-White

*Robin Grove-White has successfully combined a Chair in Environment and Society at Lancaster University with an active campaigning role. Simon Hodgson asks him how he does it.*

Professor Robin Grove-White leans backwards, massaging his temples, eyes closed. He has spent the past two days in a subterranean lecture theatre discussing the frontiers of agricultural knowledge and he is clearly drained. His input has been on the links between science and environmental policy – thinking as much about the social aspects of the questions as the technical ones – and it is this subject that I want to explore with him. But as he struggles with my opening questions, I wonder whether it was wise to squeeze the interview into his already heavy schedule.

Since 1991 Grove-White has been at Lancaster University, developing (with Brian Wynne) then directing the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change (CSEC). “CSEC looks at tensions around environmental knowledge, looking at cultural things going on in society and institutions through a prism of environmental issues”, he explains. He should understand the field: he spent fifteen years at the Council for the Protection of Rural England including six years as director. He left the CPRE for academia to understand better the processes of

environmental policy change. But Grove-White is no passive observer: he has been a member of the Greenpeace UK Board since the 1980s, including a stint as Chairman. It's an unusual mixture, and hard to believe that this thoughtful, measured man, searching somewhat haltingly for the right phrase, could be associated with such a notoriously aggressive campaigning NGO.

I ask him where it all started. Improbably, he began by working as a stand up comedian, and a freelance scriptwriter. His CV includes ‘That was the Week That Was’ and ‘The Frost Programme’. “Then I got involved in a controversy about an oil terminal”, he says, “and it was an eye-opener. I thought I'd like to really work in this sphere, but it wasn't at this stage because I was convinced about there being an environmental crisis. I was very intrigued, intellectually inquisitive, quite aggressive – I loved all that.” He recalls the fight with Shell, scrapping over a bill in Parliament: “we gave them a real run for their money. It was quite a big controversy, and a lot of national attention at the time. I thought ‘I'd like to do more of this’.” As he recounts the tale he begins to lean forward, becoming more animated. I'm reminded of a man telling war stories by the fireside, eyes gleaming.

This was just about the time Friends of the Earth was starting, and Grove-White considered moving there, but chose the CPRE because, “CPRE had a lot of cultural nous: about the planning system and how the web of Britain worked”. He was there for fifteen years, working on agriculture, planning and energy issues. “But what was striking”, he says “and is still

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amazing to me now, is how little happened.” This was his first encounter with what he calls the “glacial timescales of political action on environmental change”, and it clearly led to an intense frustration. He concluded that it wasn't simply a matter of pushing harder, but of asking “what was choking things? Why the hell does so little happen? What are the blockages, the inhibiting factors?” He moved

into academia with the intention of unearthing the causes, a route which led him to his current role.

So what has he learned? “A lot of it came down to the way the Government conceptualises ‘environment’ at the bureaucratic level as a very reduced version of it, and then uses methodologies like risk assessment which involve further reduction. When you look at controversies, these correspond very inadequately to what people are feeling and what people are concerned about”. He quotes the arguments over GM foods

as a classic case. Grove-White is a member of the AEBC – the Government's commission on biotechnology and agriculture. "It was created as a way of coping with a crisis", he says "Government really didn't know what it was doing on this issue, Blair had positioned them quite wrongly on it, the officials weren't able to advise, and they had to appoint what has turned out to be quite a feisty sort of body".

He is proud of its achievements, crediting the AEBC with starting the public debate on GM which has given the Government such a bloody nose. "A much more balanced picture has emerged, and this preposterous idea of Ministers – which they still maintain – that the public is anti-science has been nailed. If GM is as big as is claimed, we should bloody well have a big argument about it." He is passionate about these questions, and passionate about the way that they should be debated. It was the "classic ignorant, bullying way that GM has been introduced" that angers him, probably more than the technology itself.

The other side of Grove-White is emerging. His tiredness is forgotten as is the measured academic language. The conversation now turns naturally to his work with Greenpeace. "I believe in Greenpeace", he says forcefully, "I admire Greenpeace hugely, I've always been proud to be involved." He loves the way that Greenpeace has historically "put itself on the line" with its major campaigns, almost gambling the whole organisation on a single issue. Its finest moments – Brent Spar,

Muraroa – are when Greenpeace has "caught the moment, and delivered a huge shock to the system". There it is again: Grove-White's deep desire for environmental change.

But isn't there a conflict between this campaigning role and his academic work? "Sure there's a tension", he admits, "People who want to do so far me with being partisan, when I'm in a domain where that's not helpful at all. It's caused some personal moments when you just have to bite your lip, but I expect it". And therein is his uniqueness. He has no problem with commentating on the process of change, whilst being part of it himself. In fact, through the course of our discussion it becomes clear that it gives him a valuable perspective that policymakers would do well to consider.

By now Grove-White is really fired up. Any difficulty I might have had in imagining him as an activist is gone. In one interview he's been both a considered academic and a passionate campaigner. The only role that I didn't see was the stand up comedian – but then he was very tired.

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