

Chicken Little

The Green Threat to Progress

ANDREW McINTYRE

WE ARE all familiar with the Greens' approach to risk, and the panic and fear deliberately induced by threats to the environment, sea level rises, pollution and global warming. It is no small irony that this panic and fear comes at a time when good management of resources and technology, science and political organization have brought mankind to a point of comfort, well-being and certainty unimaginable at any other time in human history.

Indeed, it seems to be a paradox that it is precisely because of this well-being and certainty in our lives that we have now become obsessed with uncertainty, and have now effectively legislated to outlaw it. This uncertainty phobia is called the Precautionary Principle.

According to the *Scientific American* [David Appell, 2001], the Principle can be traced back to a committee of West German public servants in the mid-1960s. It is now a matter of law in Germany and Sweden and is increasingly finding its way into international agreements. It has even worked its way into US policy.

In Australia, back in 1992, an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment, involving all three tiers of government, gave a definition:

where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Bluntly put, that means that those who develop any new technology or application must prove that there will be absolutely no adverse effect. This, as

we know, is a scientific impossibility. Science can never prove a negative. From a public policy point of view it endorses the idea of making non-science-based decisions. In other words, caution first, science second.

The ramifications are quite horrendous. But from the viewpoint of our own society, where we seem to have almost every comfort, brilliant drug, technology and gadget imaginable, it is difficult to press this point. Not only is it almost impossible for most people today to begin to grasp just how appalling the physical environment and living conditions were barely 100 years ago in Europe, it is impossible to imagine what our world would have been like if the Precautionary Principle had been adopted a few hundred years ago. The answer is pretty dismal. There would be almost nothing of what we today take for granted, from penicillin and antibiotics, through electricity, telephones and computers, right down to knives and even fire! [see the box on the next page]. Forget about hot showers and breakfast food, let alone genetics, quantum mechanics, space exploration and pesticides. Common household bleach? 'You mean you're going to allow poison gas into my home?' The problem is that there is nothing we do or explore or experiment with that has no theoretical risk, and nearly everything carries some actual risk. But the Precautionary Principle effectively outlaws anything with risk.

In response to this universal panic by environmentalists and doomsayers, *spiked online* [<http://www.spiked-online.com/panicattack/default.stm>] recently organized a large conference in London called *Panic Attack: interrogating our obsession with risk*, in con-

junction with the Royal Institution of Great Britain and Tech Central Station, Europe. The conference covered topics from chemicals in food to children and obesity, from Gulf War Syndrome to global warming. Discussion of these issues revealed the extent of our society's preoccupation with negligible levels of actual risk, and asked why this might be.

As a run-up to the conference, scientists from all areas of research were asked to speculate on the impact of the Precautionary Principle on their fields of work, had it been in place in the past. The results certainly produce a precautionary tale. In fact, they were overwhelming, right down to the very basics of pre-human existence. 'Fire—very dangerous—plus all other useful forms of energy', claimed John Adams, Professor of Geography at University College London. 'Energy misdirected can cause harm, and the precautionary principle requires that if it can be misdirected, you must assume that it will be'. Or, as Julian Morris of the Institute of Economic Affairs in London remarked, 'If someone had evaluated the risk of fire right after it was invented, they may well have decided to eat their food raw'. So, end of fire.

Dr Gail Cardew, head of programmes at the Royal Institution in London, explains its impact on the discovery of penicillin:

Were the precautionary principle adopted at the time, penicillin would not have been given to [the first trial patient] after so little testing in animals. No doubt it would have been tested on other animals, and yet subsequently penicillin was found to be toxic to guinea pigs. In this scenario, would we have been too cautious

ever to try out 'the wonder drug' on humans?

There was overwhelming consensus amongst medical scientists that all major medical breakthroughs would have been prevented by the Precautionary Principle. There would be no exceptions. Even the live Salk polio vaccine carried a five per cent risk of inflicting the disease.

Carl Djerassi (Emeritus Professor of Chemistry at Stanford University, and father of the modern contraceptive pill) points out that not only would the contraceptive pill for women never have come to light, but it is precisely because of the precautionary principle that we still have no such pill for men. He is clear that had he been forced to deal with the restrictions and interference that are commonplace these days in biomedical research, he would never have set to work on the birth control project. No pill. Just think of that boys and girls!

One clear recent example of the negative effect of the Precautionary Principle in practice is the use of DDT. We forget that DDT actually saved millions of humans from dying of malaria. As Djerassi points out, 'it is now conveniently forgotten that DDT eradicated the disease from the entire Mediterranean region'. It is now claimed that global warming is to blame for the rise in malaria deaths when it is most probably the ban on DDT. As Dr Elizabeth M. Whelan, President of the American Council on Science and Health [*Health Priorities*, Volume 8, Number 3, 1996] puts it, 'The Precautionary Principle overlooks the possibility that real public health risks can be associated with eliminating miniscule, hypothetical risks'.

Another example of a huge benefit nearly forgone is that of Golden Rice. Ingo Potrykus (Emeritus Professor of Plant Sciences at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, and the inventor of Golden Rice) explains, 'I have invented and developed Golden Rice, a transgenic rice variety which produces provitamin A and which will substantially contribute to a reduction

Precautionary Costs?

The Bicycle; Biotechnology; Blood transfusion; CAT scans; Chlorine; the Contraceptive Pill; Cultivation of rice and maize; Digitalis; the discovery of DNA; Electric light bulbs; Electroconvulsive therapy; Fire; Gas power; GM crops; the Green Revolution; work by Galileo and Newton; High-voltage power grids; Hoes; Hybrid crops; the Human genome project; the Internal combustion engine; the Internet; In vitro fertilization; Iron; the Jet engine; Knives; the Measles vaccine; Molecular biology; Neural lesions; NMR imaging; Nuclear fission; Nuclear power; Nuclear physics; Oil; Open-heart surgery; Organ transplants; Pasteurization; Penicillin; the Periodic table; Pesticides; Plant domestication; Ploughs; the Polio vaccine; Quantum mechanics; the Rabies vaccine; Radar; Railways; Radiation; Radio; Radioisotope thermal generators; Refrigeration; Rocket power; The Smallpox vaccine; Space exploration; Steam power; Stem cell biology; the breaking of the Sound barrier; the Telephone; Water supply and distribution; the Wheel; X-rays.

in vitamin A malnutrition, thus preventing numerous children from becoming irreversibly blind. Throughout the work, it could not be guaranteed that harmful effects could be excluded. Having Golden Rice in hand, we can exclude this possibility now, but not before we had solved the scientific problem'. As he points out, 'The application of the precautionary prin-

ciple in science is in itself basically anti-science. Science explores the unknown, and therefore can *a priori* not predict the outcome. To turn an old saw on its head, it would be better to be poor, blind and safe than to be sorry'.

The madness, if not already apparent from the examples above, is confirmed with observations by Sallie Baliunas (astrophysicist, and enviro-sci host at Tech Central Station). 'Electrification of the USA—the environmental impact statements concerning the siting of power plants and transmission lines, and concerning the air and water pollutants, would still be underway. The final vote of the Precautionary Principle Committee (PPC): no, we cannot electrify the country, because of the environmental risks'.

Dr Whelan points out that the Precautionary Principle is wrong footed because it always assumes worst-case scenarios, and that it distracts consumers and policy makers alike from the known and proven threats to human health. She quotes an ancient philosopher, 'It is a serious disease to worry over what has not occurred'.

While the obsession with risk shows little sign of abating, the conference organized by *spiked online* believes that there is a large and diverse audience for critical voices in discussions about this trend. The more people who are prepared to raise their heads above the parapet, the harder it will be for new and more destructive panics to take hold.

With all this evidence of the perverse and unintended consequences of the Precautionary Principle, the reader must be wondering why so many of the anti-American hating Left are for it. Just think. If the Precautionary Principle had been applied 500 years ago, the most important discovery that would never have been made is America. Not even once. Makes you think.

Andrew McIntyre is Public Relations Manager at the Institute of Public Affairs.

I P A