

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN  
BRITAIN

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In the discussion of environmental impact analysis in Britain over the past three years, official and academic interest has largely focussed on the siting of individual large (principally industrial) developments and their effects on their environs. By contrast, there has been little discussion of the fact that, increasingly, development with far-reaching impacts on the environment is arising as a result of the implementation of the policies or programmes of government agencies and statutory bodies.

In this paper, I suggest that this is a serious gap in thinking about environmental impact assessment and try to point to the source of a possible remedy.

The two major government-sponsored studies of environmental impact assessment in the United Kingdom have been concerned only with techniques and methodologies for appraising individual projects -- oil terminals, mineral workings, power stations, chemical plants, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> They have been valuable in their own terms. For while all such proposed developments in the United Kingdom must already pass over a variety of hurdles

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(generally including a public local inquiry, which may last weeks or even months) there is no guarantee that all the possible environmental (or social) implications will be anticipated by these procedures. In the case of such individually large schemes therefore, there needs to be greater certainty of comprehensive scrutiny of environmental impacts than has been the case hitherto. The suggestions of Catlow and Thirlwall and, in particular, of Brian Clark and his colleagues could be used to improve the existing mechanisms.

However, environmental pressure groups in the United Kingdom (such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England, Friends of the Earth, the Civic Trust, the Lawyers' Ecology Group, and even the National Farmers' Union) are aware increasingly that environmental impact assessment at the individual project stage could still be largely cosmetic for certain kinds of development, even if it were carried out under the rigorous procedures proposed by Clark and the Project Appraisal for Development Control group.

Let us take a particularly topical example. It might well be helpful to know that an individual nuclear power station would give rise to X tonnes of radioactive waste per annum, would cause such-and-such a visual impact, would create Y jobs for people outside the locality, who would need Z new houses in surrounding villages to contain them. Knowing such facts could well assist the various public authorities to devise ways of reducing their impact. However, in such a case, the authorities' options would be crucially limited by the knowledge that a nuclear power station was going to be built somewhere, as a matter of policy (on the part of government or of the appropriate

official promoting agency). A truly credible environmental impact analysis, it might be argued, would have to be conducted at such a stage as to include the possibility of not building the nuclear power station at all.

The same principle could be applied to various other classes of individual project which spring from official policies -- for example, motorways, reservoirs, airports, or oil refineries. In each of these cases, the particular projects are elements in programmes devised or promoted by government departments or agencies and thereafter sanctioned as "policy".

Britain's motorway programme since the 1970 policy White Paper, "Roads for the Future," is a case in point. This programme has given rise to a range of substantial environmental impacts -- opening up hitherto remote rural areas to heavy traffic; drawing freight from, and so contributing to the decline of, the railways; stimulating increased commuting by car; helping bring vehicle noise to ever-wider areas; and so on.

Yet whenever an individual stretch of motorway is proposed, assessment of its environmental impact cannot take full account of such factors, except insofar as they relate to the restricted stretch of motorway. The impacts as a whole escape appraisal. This pattern of omission has repeated itself at motorway public inquiries time and time again. It has caused great public exasperation -- so much so in fact that there was substantial public sympathy for civil disobedience at several motorway inquiries in 1975 and 1976. This led to the creation of two ad hoc government committees, whose recently recommended palliatives will not wholly solve the problems.

I am suggesting therefore that there is a growing need for the principles of environmental impact assessment to be applied to the overall policies and programmes which give rise to such developments, particularly when they involve public sector investment or direction.

Nor need the principle be restricted only to programmes which manifest themselves in conventional land use developments. Less obvious policy initiatives, such as those which give rise to the construction of Concorde or those which give rise to the ever more intensive use of chemical fertilisers in agriculture, could also benefit from environmental impact assessment. So too could the New Towns programme or certain of the development strategies devised for Britain's regions by the various Economic Planning Councils.

It becomes apparent that there are a vast array of official initiatives which lead to extensive and frequently deleterious environmental impacts -- and that these require exhaustive environmental impact assessment quite as much as (if not more than) the relatively few developments (largely in the private sector) on which Catlow and Thirlwall and Clark and the PADC group have concentrated.

This dimension of the environmental impact assessment question arises, I suggest, because of the steady increase of government involvement in long range industrial activity and planning (I speak here of the United Kingdom, although I suspect that the principle applies equally to other western industrialized nations). Such government involvement is a growing and probably unavoidable fact of contemporary life. But it calls for the urgent development of effective monitoring, to anticipate and

mitigate environmental impacts.

A constitutional lawyer would claim that in the United Kingdom such control over the policies of the executive is the role of Parliament. Alas, it is a role which Parliament has exercised all too feebly in the sphere with which we are concerned. The efficient appraisal of environmental impacts is a function for which Britain's legislature has proved ill-equipped in recent times. The range of other pressures on Members of Parliament, the executive's control of the Parliamentary timetable, the lack of continuous expertise of even Parliament's specialist Select Committees -- all these facts have militated against exhaustive scrutiny by Parliament of the environmental impact of government policies.

But it seems clear that moves to improve such scrutiny should be designed to strengthen precisely Parliament's control over the executive, rather than to accelerate its decline by allocating the environmental impact assessment function to yet another new agency of the executive. (The creation of a Council on Environmental Quality along American lines in Britain would have precisely this latter effect, it seems to me). Environmental impact assessment ought to be a function of Parliament. The inherent tension between executive and legislature provides a highly appropriate basis for critical challenge of the kind that environmental impact assessment at the policy level properly implies.

Possible formulae for improving Parliament's capacities in this sphere might include the following steps: the creation of new Select Committees with responsibility for environmental impact

assessment in particular policy spheres; obligations on government agencies and departments to produce environmental impact statements for certain classes of policy initiative; and the use of public inquiries (under the aegis of the appropriate Select Committee) to elicit the full range of informed public criticism of the draft impact statements, to assist Parliament's process of appraisal.

In 1976, my own organization, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, advanced proposals along these lines to the Procedure Committees of both Houses of Parliament. A copy of one of these is attached.

I am aware that I have stretched the conventional understanding of environmental impact assessment, by applying the concept to the broad sphere of policy. But the growing fact of long-range executive planning in Britain appears to mean that individual industrial and/or public sector development can no longer be seen as isolated artifacts. Rather, they are elements in broader programmes and policies. Realistic appraisal of their environmental impacts must therefore entail examination of these policies and programmes.

The challenge is to reconcile this necessity with strong democratic institutions, rather than further debilitate them by simply handing over environmental impact assessment responsibilities to experts within the executive.

NOTE

1. Department of the Environment, Environmental Impact Analysis, Research Report 11 (London: Department of the Environment, 1976), and Department of the Environment, Assessment of Major Industrial Applications: A Manual, Research Report 13 (London: Department of the Environment, 1976). The first of these reports is generally known as the Catlow and Thirlwall report, after its authors. The second report was prepared by the Project Appraisal for Development Control group at the University of Aberdeen, under the direction of Mr. Brian Clark.