

The Ethics of non-violent Direct Action.

Christopher Busby
Coordinator: Green Committee of 100

I would like to begin with a question. If you were sailing on the Titanic and were aware of the danger of a fatal collision, that is to say, you knew that the present course and speed were dangerously wrong, how would you react? Would you try to get to see the Captain to explain your fears, your analysis? Or would you position yourself as close as possible to a lifeboat and hope for the best? Or would you, perhaps, act independently and for the greater good (and your own) and slip down to the engine room to disconnect something vital?

In 1992 the nuclear power station at Trawsfynydd in North Wales had been closed for a year. The station was over twenty five years old, its planned lifespan, and the welds in the reactor pressure vessel had become neutron embrittled. The proposal was to restart it and run at a higher temperature to help make the welds more ductile. The possibilities for catastrophe were infinite: meltdown would make North Wales uninhabitable and would spread radiation as far as Chernobyl. We knew that there was some pressure brought to bear on the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate. In informal conversations with anti- nuclear activists they had expressed their own misgivings and had looked to the anti-nuclear lobby to provide a back up of public support for what they wanted to do, for safety's sake, and against the background of government needs to package and sell the nuclear industry without anyone rocking that particular boat. This, then, was one particular Titanic, in 1992. The anti-nuclear groups in Wales had demonstrated in the conventional manner. People had paraded through the streets of nearby and more distant towns, chanting and carrying banners. In spite of an opinion poll which showed 56% of the constituency opposing the restart, the Green Party candidate in the General Election, fought largely on this issue, received derisory levels of support. A decision was made to act directly: all other avenues had been tried. Green Party activists chained the inner electric security gate shut, fastening themselves to it and preventing all traffic movements in and out of the station.

The essential threat here was implicit in the refusal to consider the legal implications of the action. A step had been taken across the line: more steps could follow if need be. This action, backed up by a sustained campaign on the safety issues and on the parallel issue of the health effects of low-level radiation, resulted in the permanent closure of Trawsfynydd power station some six months later.

This was in 1993. The decision to bypass traditional democratic channels arose out of an analysis of the issues involved in the parallel ecological disaster projections which had informed the Green Party's philosophical basis some twenty years earlier. For the Green Party, those clever people on the Titanic who had not only perceived the problem but had felt they had to try and do something, had fared badly in the General Election of 1992. And, although widely supported by the people, they were not seen as worldly enough, perhaps even nasty enough, to provide a sensible alternative to the traditional political circus. Furthermore, the idea of a Green Party involved in the contemporary political process, widely seen to be the problem anyway, means that those who support the Green Party don't vote. Properly comprehending that the timescale of the ecological threat was too short for success through the voting system, the Strategy Review Group of the National Council, of which I was a member, decided on an alternative approach. This was to

broaden the concept of the political party away from voting politics towards the utilization of all democratic spaces which might help effect change in the desired direction. At the very edge of this process bordering on the remote rim of the philosophical perimeter of the democratic concept, exists non-violent direct action or NVDA.

Let it not be supposed, either, that this change in emphasis was not achieved without a struggle. For the Green Party is above all a party of intellectuals, a part of analysts, diagnosticians and prescription writers. There is a strong contingent of the descendants of Descartes, continuing with the tradition that faith and thoughts are more important than deeds. The Cartesian approach began, you will recall, by calling into doubt the existence, in the world, of anything at all. His 'cogito ergo sum' says 'If I am living an illusion and all the world is an illusion, I must exist in order to be deceived.' The only reality is thought. This pre-eminence of thought over action, this valuation of the intellectual above the worker, the thinker above the doer, is a tradition that goes back at least to the beginnings of Christianity. But if Descartes saw himself as a brain in a vat in 1642, only seven years later, Gerrard Winstanley, the English anarchist, was leading the diggers' occupation of St George's Hill in London. Winstanley wrote:

'My mind was not at rest because nothing was acted; and thoughts ran in me that words and writings were nothing and must die; for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou doest nothing.'

Winstanley and the diggers occupied St George's Hill to use the land to produce food for themselves and their children. This was perceived as an illegal act: the troopers were sent to pull down their cottages and destroy their crops. 'They defied the landlords; they defied the laws: they were the dispossessed reclaiming what was theirs' runs a contemporary song. This was their moral imperative, their reason for acting. The land could not be owned because ownership of land was wrong. The Green Party in 1993 found themselves addressing these tensions between thought and action. Our proposals brought to the Hastings conference were based on a belief that democracy had died and that a new political approach was needed: that voting in elections in a two party system was no longer democratic. The latter view is widely held outside the Green Party: we may cite Charter 88 and Liberty, the recent opposition to the Criminal Justice Act as examples. Ordinary people are disempowered in a system that permits young people in thin clothes to beg on the streets in winter whilst fat men drive past in luxury cars. This is enlightened intellectual mankind in the last few years of the twentieth century. And so the Green Party voted to broaden its definition of politics to include non-violent direct action, and set up the Green Committee of 100, taking the name from the CND direct action group of the late 1950s. The purpose and direction of this group are, however, very different from the original Committee, whose objective was nuclear disarmament and the mobilisation of large numbers of the Great and the Good. No one is now Great. Who would identify the Good? It is the objective of the Green Committee of 100 to encourage a culture of direct action across the entire policy spectrum. To tie together all the tribes of direct action protestors, the dispossessed, with a single holistic philosophy and to give these disparate groups a moral connection with one another. A political unity of vision. GC100 members are Green Party members. They are given training in non-violent direct action: they in their turn train others. The Committee has a regional structure and is a very loosely constrained affair. Its strategy follows on more from that of the Wehrmacht than conventional battle strategy. That is, only the general direction is accepted, or agreed. The means are decided differently and can change quickly. The idea is to develop a networked tribe or nation of direct action groups. GC100 members are now involved in all the direct action protests you have seen on the TV or read about in the newspapers. GC100 occupied the New Squatland Yard flats in Victoria Street, advertising the co-

existence of empty luxury flats owned by an offshore company as an investment. GC100 chained up the gates of Dungeness nuclear power station. GC100 people are among those in the trees on the M65 and formed part of the organization there. GC100 people occupied the Sheriff's Office in Lancaster while he was out plucking the tree houses down. GC100 people broke into Stonehenge last week and danced on the stone with two fingers raised at English Heritage. GC100 people were arrested in the Brighton sea veal calf demonstrations. By taking the dialogue to the streets, to the trees, to the road- building and to the opposition of evil laws and a pernicious system with our own bodies we follow Nietzsche's Zarathustra, the madman who ran through the streets shouting 'God is dead'. We step outside the rational analysis, the endless writing about and talking about. We enter the realm of doing. We define a different way for a new kind of politics. The encouragement of direction action is not a desire for chaos or an attempt to pull down and trample. It is an attempt to provide an underlying philosophy and to tie together all the tribes of opposition. The state should be grateful to such people. Instead of peaceful, non- violent tree-sitters, they could have bricks through windows, Toxteth-style riots. For the social contract was broken by the state when Thatcher took us away from post-war socialism. And the state and its professed culture of more, bigger and better has divided the rulers from the ruled and the rich from the poor, this process now threatens everyone.

But what kind of society can exist when its laws are being continually opposed, its plans thwarted? Kerala in southern India is a good model. It is frequently cited as an example of the kind of achievements in health, education, and quality of life given the political will for radical policies of redistribution. For example, infant mortality in Kerala is 22, compared with 96 for all India. Life expectancy is 70 as opposed to 54 for all India. Female life expectancy is 73, strikingly out of line with the rest of India, where women have a much lower life expectancy than men. Subsidised education, subsidised food, total literacy, the list of indicators of good life quality continues. In 1957 Kerala voted in the world's first democratically elected communist government, led by the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM). The political will for sweeping land reforms, radical policies of redistribution, and strengthening of workers' rights has come from successive CPM governments since then. But what is striking about past and contemporary politics in Kerala is the high degree of popular mobilization and politicization which have made these reforms not something handed down by a benevolent socialist government but a continuous process in which massive numbers of people have played and continue to play a part. The main historical factor behind these developments has been the evolution of popular direct action to produce change and oppose injustice. Whatever peculiar political chemistry resulted in these Roman Catholic communists developing their involvement in the political process to the level of an art-form, it has certainly resulted in an effective and good form of social system. This is citizen empowerment. But what is the limit? Can we encourage people to break any law they personally dislike, or is there a need for a larger moral justification? The blazing house, save the children scenario involves a sudden decision. No law would find you guilty of breaking and entering.. But what of less obvious situations? And what if the illegal act averted the hypothetical catastrophe: there would be no catastrophe to refer to, only a theoretical prediction. One widely respected political theorist is Robert Dahl. In , *After the Revolution-Authority in a Good Society* he asks, 'How can we justify opposing the will of the state?'. He defines three criteria for authority to be acceptable and morally justifiable. The most important is competence: we may choose to oppose a decision made by a state if we feel the decision is an incompetent one. It is now manifestly clear that decisions which affect the future well-being of everybody on Earth are being made by people

who are incompetent. Too often pressure is put on those who have the competence to judge-- decisions are coloured by political need. And the consequence is the development of an evil system. But how do we judge whether a system is evil. Can it be made an objective value judgement? Clearly there is some element of personal choice, another of Dahl's criteria. But there are also objective indicators. All must agree that a society which causes illness and death among its members is objectively wrong. All must agree to oppose that society in which independent measures of life quality demonstrate wide and seemingly random differences built in as a fundamental purpose and object. And indeed all do see that. In a recent Radio 4 phone-in about direct action last week the presenter was hard put to find anyone to oppose direct action: 95 per cent of the callers supported it. The EC environment minister Carlos Ripa di Meana lauded the Twyford Down protesters. Those young and old people, there in the front line to save the planet, are driving a wedge into the capital market-driven industrial expansion view of progress. And everywhere among them, providing justification, training, strategy, and a holistic philosophy tying all the different strands together is the Green Party through the Green Committee of 100.

Christopher Busby
South Place Ethical Society Lecture
1994; published in The Ethical Record