

Climate change—what we can do

Summary of a discussion by the Environmental Footprint Group, Oetrange, 14 April 2014

Present: Philippa Seymour (chair), Anna Fox, Andrew Hallan, Dick & Lisa Holdsworth, Carol & Stephen McCarthy, Simon Norcross, Edward Seymour and Evelyn Sweets

Introducing the discussion, Philippa referred to the three lectures given recently by eminent speakers suggesting the way forward: Anders Wijkmann, whose Club of Rome's 2052 campaign called for radical economic changes; Benedikt Härlin, whose organisation 'Meine Landwirtschaft' put forward eight solutions involving agriculture; and Mathias Binswanger of Northwestern Switzerland University, who advocated a change in people's attitudes to well-being.

Electric cars

Simon Norcross produced a spreadsheet showing how he expected to reduce CO₂ emissions from fuel consumption by 94 % from 2009, from 3 tonnes of carbon to 350 kg, by switching from diesel- and petrol-powered cars (Audi A8 and Lotus Esprit) to an electric Smart ForTwo, and by cutting his mileage from 25 000 km to 10 000 km a year. He agreed that it also reflected a change in his attitude to transport: a move from a country village to the city, and more use of public transport; and that the carbon-saving calculations did not include the carbon cost of producing the new car (no figures available from Mercedes). But it demonstrated that commerce was responding to the challenge and making dramatic progress.

Discussion focused on other possible changes of behaviour: switching to the bicycle (€1300 to equip a touring bike with four panniers); more frequent shopping, which reduces food waste; shopping online for home delivery, so that one vehicle replaces 50 people's shopping trips (now available from Naturata and some supermarkets, drinks suppliers and organic farms); and relying totally on public transport (realistic only in the city). Attitudes to the car among young people are changing, too: it is increasingly regarded as a utility, rather than a status symbol. And a recent BBC programme had pointed out that carbon emissions were decreasing faster than the IPCC had predicted.

The economic solution

On Wijkmann's book and arguments, there was some scepticism about their lack of practicality. Wave power had been discredited by Mackay, and the transfer of solar power from the Sahara was politically vulnerable. Jorgen Randers's book 2052 was more practical in its approach. Wijkmann's enthusiasm for 'neuroscience' was implausible unless it meant understanding how to motivate public action. How indeed were people to be persuaded by rational argument, when politicians and the general public were still obsessed by GDP growth, and a zero-growth economy was now required?

Support was increasing for the idea of a *universal basic income*: the Luxembourg Chamber of Deputies was running a petition on the issue. A progressive tax on consumption, rather than on income, as advocated by Götz Werner, would be feasible using the existing tax system. If the EU were to introduce the basic income, the result would attract voters by reducing income inequality across the EU and reverse 'poverty migration' from the poorer member states, where the minimum income level would obviously go furthest. However, its educational impact would be gradual. Environmental awareness could be promoted in schools and the workplace through legislation, making the present voluntary recommendations a legal requirement.

The agricultural solution

There was general agreement that developing countries still needed to have protectionist policies to preserve their farm industries; improving women's rights and primary education looked like the best way to increase farming efficiency and combat hunger. How much did agricultural training in Luxembourg promote a green agenda? 'Bio' production had clearly taken off, and Ettelbruck

students had devised a ‘sponsor a chicken’ scheme; could there not be action to reduce meat consumption, backed by health education? When one in three women were anaemic, would this exacerbate the problem? (For a balanced account, see *Eating Animals*, by Jonathan Safran-Foer.) Young people were more receptive to the arguments, particularly Härlin’s point about Europe’s annual imports of animal feed and biofuels being tantamount to ‘importing’ 35 million hectares of land. But Luxembourg had a cultural problem about portion size, with restaurants consequently having to throw away one-third of their meals. Recent campaigns had demonstrated the ability to feed 5000 people from this surplus food. Could caterers, perhaps via their wholesaler La Provençale, be persuaded to inform diners of the provenance of their meat: whether grain- or grass-fed? Could diners insist on smaller portions, or on the right to take leftovers home?

Conclusions

Drawing on these ideas, the meeting suggested the following recommendations.

- When eating out, fight ‘portion creep’; demand vegetables, and vegetarian menus;
- Hold a vegetarian dinner-party;
- Eat meat less often, as the Greens had advocated in Germany;
- Shop for chicken or rabbit rather than beef as they are more efficient converters of animal feed into meat;
- Shop for less but more often; order online; subscribe to veggie box schemes (Biobus, Naturata);
- Repair, don’t replace: search online for spare parts for domestic appliances—even cars;
- Keep cars until they go wrong;
- Store less stuff;
- Entice other people to join you, one step at a time (cf the Robert Schuman dictum about ‘a series of small steps that first establish a sense of common purpose’);
- Get in touch with the politicians (European elections coming up): join your commune’s specialist committees, and consider party-political involvement.