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## Interview: Lord Dick Taverne

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# Ex-Greenpeace Activist Backs Nuclear Power

*Dick Taverne is a member of the House of Lords in Great Britain. A former member of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, he realized that the attitudes of his past associates in the environmental movement are geared toward anti-science. He then wrote a book about environmentalism titled March of Unreason: Science, Democracy, and the New Fundamentalism, published by Oxford University Press in March 2005.*

*He is not the only leading environmentalist to change his mind recently. James Lovelock, the originator of the Gaia hypothesis, that the Earth is a self-regulating body, broke ranks with the rabid environmentalists to back nuclear power, as a way to defeat (alleged) global warming. Since his August 2004 statement, many others have issued statements backing nuclear power and the development of biotechnology. These include: Patrick Moore, one of the founding members of Greenpeace; former Anglican Bishop Hugh Montefiore, the former lead trustee of Friends of the Earth; and green godfather Stuart Brand of the Whole Earth Catalog, who wrote in a recent article that the environmentalist movement is going to have to rethink its attitudes toward nuclear power, biotechnology, and population growth. These environmentalists are now seeing that Parson Malthus was totally wrong: that through the development of technology, larger populations can be sustained.*

*Lord Taverne was interviewed on March 21 by Gregory B. Murphy.*

**EIR:** Could you tell us about your background and how you got involved in this fight for science—radiation, nuclear power, biotech—against pseudoscience and crazy popular opinion?

**Taverne:** Well, I'm not a scientist myself. My background was originally the law, and then, I was a member of the House of Commons, and then I had connections with industry. Then I was appointed to the House of Lords. But in recent times, really the last ten years, I've gotten increasingly concerned about the relationship between the science and public policy, and about public attitudes to science. I'm married to a scientist. And one of the things which always surprises me is that

when people say, "I know nothing about science"—it's not so much an admission; it's almost stated as a boast.

There is at the moment a sort of anti-science current running. There's a distrust of experts. We had some unpleasant experiences with BSE [bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or "mad cow" disease], and before that, with thalidomide. And there's a general feeling of suspicion towards science and expertise, and people are particularly impressed by a lot of the sort of "back-to-nature" fashions, which promote complementary medicine, alternative medicine.

They're also very keen on organic farming; the buying of organic farming is growing by leaps and bounds. And they've become very hostile to modern developments like genetic engineering, at least as far as plants are concerned; they accept it in medicine, because of the obvious benefits.

And I think this mood of hostility to science, could be very dangerous in the long run, both because it could destroy an industry in which Europe has had great traditional strength—Britain's plant science has always been extremely high quality—and so could be economically damaging, and because it's also dangerous to abandon respect for evidence, and go for intuition, and the sort of vague hankering after mystical, medieval times when man lived in unity with nature.

**EIR:** Could you tell us a little bit about your book?

**Taverne:** I start by looking at the time of the Enlightenment, and how this mood of optimism then, turned to a sort of contemporary mood of greater pessimism, which is more evident in Europe, I think, than it is in the United States. And I say that there were several causes for that.

I think there was the reaction to nuclear weapons—the feeling that the world could be destroyed. But the main force, in a way, was an extreme environmentalism. It started with Rachel Carson, and her book *Silent Spring*. It was a very inspiring book, but she overdid it. She said, amongst other things, that DDT caused cancer, and this led to a worldwide ban on DDT, which had the most disastrous effects. I mean, DDT was the most successful agent ever invented for fighting vector-borne disease. Malaria was virtually exterminated, eradicated, in many of the areas where DDT was being sprayed. Now that it's no longer sprayed, malaria is killing a million people a year.

So, extreme environmentalism—not sensible, pragmatic environmentalism, which I support—extreme environmentalism came to the fore, and it has found its expression through a lot of the green movements, which are very strong in Europe, and have just turned people's backs on science.

My first example is alternative medicine. Homeopathy, for example, is nonsense on stilts. It's based on the doctrine of "like cures like," for which there is no scientific evidence. And then, because that means treating people with poison and making people ill, it has a law of infinitesimals, which says that you have to dilute substances, and the greater the dilution, the greater the benefit. And you get dilution to one to the





*After being an activist with Greenpeace and other environmentalist causes, Lord Taverne came to realize that their anti-nuclear scare stories were not scientifically grounded. "There are a lot of phony scares about nuclear power," he said. "Of course, you've got to be very careful about radiation; but in small doses, it's quite interesting, radiation can actually do you good!"*

power of 30, which, of course, means the original substance has completely disappeared, so that all that works, in the end, is the placebo effect.

Then there's the craze for "organic farming." Now, organic farming may sound very good, and in Britain, certainly every TV chef, every celebrity chef, assumes organic is the only way to eat. Supermarkets tell us to buy organics—it's good for their profits because it costs more—and yet, what is it based on? It's based on an original sort of mysticism, a special feeling for the soil, and there is Rudolf Steiner, who believed in feeding the soil with cow horns stuffed with entrails, and believed in biodynamic cultivation, and planting according to phases of the Moon.

But it's based on the absolutely basic chemical fallacy that synthetic chemicals are bad, and natural chemicals are good. There are numerous synthetic chemicals which are very valuable; sulfonamides are one. Lots of synthetic chemicals are very beneficial, and lots of natural chemicals can be very damaging: Lots of damaging, poisonous, natural chemicals occur in nature.

And every time it's been tried, in blind tests, where people have actually been subjected to it, it's been found wanting. Our foods-standards agencies, several times, have been asked to rule on organic foods, and they say it's got no higher nutritional content. But it's very fashionable.

But the absolutely key issue on which I concentrate, is the central battlefield where the forces of reason and unreason meet: genetically modified crops. Now there's a terrific campaign against that in Europe, and it's not based on evidence.

I mean, you in America have been eating genetically modified products for well over seven or eight years, and I haven't even noticed lawyers bringing lawsuits. And if American lawyers don't sue, there must be something right!

There's *no* evidence [that genetically modified foods are harmful]. The international Academies of Science, from America, from Britain, from Brazil, from Mexico, India, China, and the Third World Academy of Sciences, they've all examined the questions as to whether there's danger to health, and they've come to the conclusion that no damage to human health has been proved. And there are now 70 million hectares, worldwide, farmed with genetically modified crops.

But then people say it's dangerous for the environment. There's no evidence for that, and certainly there's lots of evidence of good for the environment. It uses fewer herbicides; it means that there will be a reduction in pesti-

cides, because they're pest-resistant crops. It's very good for poverty in the world. The GM cotton is now grown by something like 6-7 million poor farmers, and their income has gone up, and their health has improved because they don't have to spray pesticides; and the environment has gained from fewer pesticides.

So, there's everything to be said in favor of genetically modified crops, but Europe is agin' it. So, I think that is a terrible indictment of this new anti-science mood, and I think it's high time we woke up to it and realize that this is one of the technologies that's going to benefit the future. It's going to help—it's not going to cure, but it's going to help reduce hunger in the world; it's going to help reduce disease in the world, through plant-based vaccines, and golden rice, and exciting new developments like that. And it could also fight poverty amongst farmers, where some of the worst poverty exists.

Of course, it has to be watched, of course it has to be regulated, but, potentially, it's a very hopeful crop.

And, then again, I also look in my book at the "precautionary principle." Now, it's often invoked, and seldom defined. And when you probe the definitions, it's all about not meeting the needs of present generations without prejudicing the needs of future generations. Nobody defines what those needs are! We don't know what the needs of future generations are going to be.

And if you look at the definition of the precautionary principle, it's either so obvious that it doesn't need stating, like: "If there's evidence of danger, be careful." Well, who

wouldn't agree? Or it's so vague that it's meaningless. Or it's defined in such a way that almost any perception of danger could invoke it, in which case it becomes a great principle against innovation, and a great danger to enterprise, and to creativity.

So I do think there's a lot wrong with current attitudes toward science, and I think there's a danger that if this prevails—say it applies to new technologies like nanotechnology—Europe could become a bit of a backwater in science. We should learn the lesson from medieval Islam, which was once the center for all enlightenment in the world—mathematics, modern medicine, astronomy—Islam between the 9th and the 12th Centuries, was the center of science. And then the dogmatists came along, who believed in the literal interpretation of the Koran. They wouldn't have any influx of outside ideas, and Islam became, for centuries, a backwater.

There's another example from history, which Jared Diamond quotes, that the Chinese, at the end of the 15th Century, were the leaders of the world's shipbuilding; they had 400-foot junks, whereas the puny European ships were just over 100 feet long. They could have dominated the Indian Ocean. But a faction came to power that outlawed shipbuilding!

Now, there's a faction that's coming in, that is very influential in Europe, which is outlawing genetically modified crops.

So, I think there are great dangers.

**EIR:** What is the percentage of public funding for organic farming over public funding of research into biotechnology research, trying to grow the crops, and development there [in Britain]?

**Taverne:** I can't give you the percentages. I can give you some sums. They are modest, in the way of support for organic farming. The government gives some \$20 million a year to persuade people to convert to organic farming. It isn't a big sum, but the principle is so stupid. Why support something which is so much more inefficient than other forms of farming, and which has really got no real merit in it? It's based on myth.

As far as public support for research into biotechnology is concerned, there's still quite a lot of public support, but it is declining. This is a world phenomenon. And most of the research which is being done, of course, is being financed by companies. We've got a very strong science base in this, but it is in danger of suffering because of the fact that most agribusinesses are moving out of Britain, and out of Europe.

**EIR:** It sounds very similar to how they tell the farmers here to switch from producing crops with a small production tax credit, to turn their farm into a wind farm, with these windmills. It's a 1 or 2% tax break, but if it weren't for that, the wind industry would basically blow away.

**Taverne:** The same is true in this country. I think it would blow away, too, And I wouldn't actually mind seeing the back

of it. Because, I believe that, if we are going to try and limit carbon emissions, and, on the whole I think it's a sensible thing to do, then we should go for nuclear power.

**EIR:** That's my background. I was in the Navy's nuclear power program here in the United States.

**Taverne:** Well, there are a lot of phony scares about nuclear power. Of course, you've got to be very careful about radiation; but in small doses, it's quite interesting, radiation can actually do you good! I've looked at the statistics for workers in nuclear shipyards, in the United States and Canada, and, also generally worldwide, of people who work in the nuclear industry. And the interesting thing is, that they actually have lower average rates of cancer than the control groups—which is something that the Japanese have recognized, but most other people haven't.

**EIR:** That's very true, and *21st Century Science & Technology* magazine as covered the low-level radiation phenomenon quite extensively.

**Taverne:** I'm glad to hear it. I've been regarded as a bit of a maverick in Britain by raising this in debates in the House of Lords, and writing articles about it in the newspapers.

**EIR:** The other thing is, that the nuclear industry here in the United States, and probably over there in Europe also, won't send experts out to talk, to defend a contract for a plant. They allow the environmentalists to come in with "Chernobyl wiped out so much," and Three Mile Island, and "Radiation's-gonna-get-you stories." I equate that with what's happening in the United States around this biotechnology. There's a lot of mysticism about the language—genetically modified foods, and these different things—so it gives a little leeway to the "eco-fundamentalists," as you describe them, to come in with their anti-science.

**Taverne:** That is absolutely right. One of the interesting things is, the way in which the anti-science lobbies (I call them the eco-fundamentalists) have captured the language. I mean, "frankenfoods," what a brilliant term! They have really been extremely clever, the way they've used language. "Terminator seeds"—well, these are sterile seeds to stop cross-pollination, and they were never actually produced. In fact, people have suggested we should now start developing seeds which have genetic incompatibility, to prevent cross-pollination. Well, of course, genetic incompatibility is precisely what terminator seeds were designed to achieve. But "terminator"—that sounds really scary.

After all, cross-pollination takes place in nature all the time, but [with the eco-fundamentalists] it's not called cross-pollination, it's called contamination, which suggests that you're spreading poison. There are all sorts of ways in which subtle language changes are being used by the eco-fundamentalists, and I think we should be aware of that, and have our eyes open. . . .

**EIR:** The other question I had for you, was how you've equated this eco-fundamentalism to the right-wing fundamentalists in the United States, with their mysticism and religious outlook.

**Taverne:** . . . I regard them as very similar. The reason I call them eco-fundamentalist—I mean, technically, I suppose “fundamentalist” should be kept for people who have a sacred text, which they say is literally true. So, Creationists are fundamentalists, because they argue that it doesn't matter what the evidence says about evolution; it's written in the Bible that it was created in what ever it was—7,000 years—and you cannot contradict the word of the Bible, because it's the literal word of God. Well, you can't argue with people like that.

You can't argue with the eco-fundamentalists either. One of them, who was the director of the Greenpeace movement in Great Britain, was cross-examined by a committee in the House of Lords, and he was asked, “Is there any evidence that could change your mind?” And he said, “No, there isn't. I'm absolutely certain this is wrong.”

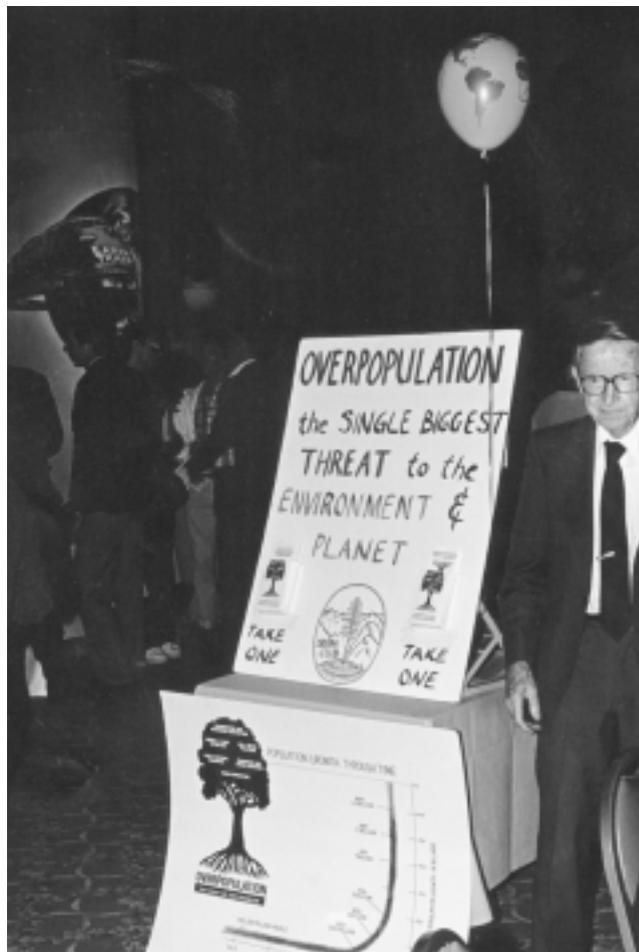
Well, that's like being a Creationist. And that's why I've likened the two. And also, when you get to some of the fundamentalists—not the Creationists, but the others—they take to violence in order to suppress choice. In our case, we had people who trashed crops—crops which were supposed to be tested to see whether they had a good or bad environmental effect, were not allowed to be grown, because these new crusaders rode out in their white suits—it wasn't quite medieval armor, but it was white suits, as it were—to suggest that they were subject to extreme danger of attack by the enemy, with poisons. They rode out and were trashing these crops, breaking the law.

I say they were not altogether unlike people who use force to try and close down abortion clinics. So, I think that religious fundamentalists, and eco-fundamentalists, don't believe in argument, and they don't believe in science, and they are prepared to use undemocratic methods in order to achieve their aims.

**EIR:** I've run into a few in my time, both the eco-fundamentalists and the religious fundamentalists, and you're fighting a losing battle if you're trying to argue to bring a sense of reason into their mind.

**Taverne:** But the trouble is, on the whole, the press don't treat Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth in that way; they regard them as really rather noble movements that are trying to save the planet. They tend to regard them as the “goodies,” and the others, perhaps, as the “nasty polluters.” There's a certain media bias against biotechnology in this country.

**EIR:** Yes, I remember the uproar back in August, when James Lovelock came out saying the best way to get rid of this problem with global warming, is through development of nuclear power. Greenpeace, Earth First, and all those guys came out. They had been holding him up as if he were a high



*The underlying fraud of the zero-population-growth movement is the Malthusian argument that population growth will outstrip natural resources. This ignores the basic principle of human creative, technological advance. Here: a crusader at a Globescope conference in Los Angeles.*

authority, but now he was seen as the lowest-level person imaginable, to be sent to Hades.

But the problem in the United States, with what he said, is that now the nuclear power industry is using Lovelock's statement as their buttress, instead of coming out with the truth about how radiation is *not* going to get you. That's the key. And, we've had good scientists that work at different labs in the United States, who are signed on to that pragmatic outlook, about “defeating global warming,” as a way to get nuclear power going, instead of talking about nuclear being the great advancement that helps society.

**Taverne:** But dissidents are treated as heretics, and I'm waiting for the big attacks on my book. GM Watch has already started. I'm waiting for it. Somebody said, “Oh, you're publishing a book. You'd better batten down the hatches and prepare for stormy weather.” . . .

**EIR:** On global warming, there's a great speech that the au-

thor Michael Crichton gave. . . . You know how the people in the CETI [Communication With Extraterrestrial Intelligence] program—communicating to “people” off planet—how that became “the thing,” and then Sagan’s “nuclear winter,” and then that immediately got picked up by the fundamentalist crowd of the environmentalist movement, into becoming the global warming issue, which all of a sudden took off. But the best part, I thought, was his analogy about how these computer models work. In 1901, if you did a computer model and it went until 2001, there would be horse-drawn carriages, cars would be very limited, there’d be no nuclear power, because the computer model misses the main thing: creativity and the power of the human mind to make discoveries to better the environment, and society.

**Taverne:** Yes, I agree. I’ve got some lovely projections. I don’t give the obvious one about the head of IBM, who said the world would need only three giant computers. There’s a wonderful example in the 1930s, of a famous economist who protested about plans to build new ships that would cross the Atlantic, say, an hour faster, than what was already a very short time: at the cost of using intensely, a very rare resource—coal—with the effect that future generations might not be able to cross the Atlantic at all. That makes a marvelous example of how people’s projections of future technology, future shortages, future developments, are nearly always wrong.

**EIR:** Another point you brought up earlier, is that you said that most people, and young people in particular, hold it as a badge of honor that they know nothing about science.

**Taverne:** Yes.

**EIR:** Lyndon LaRouche has a youth movement that’s working on going back to the original discoveries, like Sadi Carnot’s book, the first breakthrough book on thermodynamics, and actually trying to work through what the discoveries are, to rebuild that within the younger people, to get them to think about science again, where your discoveries are being made, that will revolutionize the economy and society.

**Taverne:** Well, that’s great. I’ve started a new organization in Britain called Sense About Science. It started only a couple of years ago, and one of the things that we’re doing is that we are setting up a membership scheme for young scientists who’ll go out and talk to schools—people who are just doing their Ph.D.’s—and it’s getting a very enthusiastic response from young scientists, but also to get back to schools, and get people to realize what the excitement of science is. I wasn’t brought up in the sciences, and I wish I had been. I wish knew some science; I’m woefully ignorant.

**EIR:** But at least you ask the questions.

**Taverne:** Yes, and I’ve been looking at what the issues are, and trying to judge the evidence. . . .

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