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Experts, Establishments and Learning from Struggle

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Editor's Note

These incisive essays (here combined into one) by Brian Martin first appeared 25 years ago this year.[1] They speak to questions of (professional) expertise and positional power, and their deployment and abuse, in society; and they made a great impact on me when I first read Brian's book many years ago. Professor Martin has given his kind permission for these pieces to be reproduced here, as in my view, these challenging ideas have at least as much import and relevance today in the era of Covid-19, as they did a quarter century ago.

Contemporary Introduction and Commentary by Brian Martin

Confronting the Experts was published 25 years ago, in a different era. Has anything changed?

As I describe in the introduction chapter to the book, my own encounters with establishment experts go back even further, to 1976 in the Australian nuclear power debate. My experiences led me to be on the lookout for analyses about the role of experts.

I had the idea of writing a sort of 'how-to' book for challenging experts. In a social science milieu, I felt a bit inhibited about what I proposed to write: it would not be a sophisticated social analysis but rather, a practical treatment. After two years of dithering, I eventually began work on the text for *Strip the Experts.* I provided four ways of taking down experts, in a partially non-judgemental fashion, given that some of the ways involved attacking experts as people, rather than addressing their arguments. I intended to be a bit provocative.

Yet *Strip the Experts* wasn't enough for me. I thought of editing a collection in which contributors would tell of their efforts challenging a phalanx of experts backed by a powerful establishment. Getting the chapters together turned out to be reasonably straightforward, but finding a publisher was not so easy. Initially I went to State University of New York Press, where I encountered a hostile reader. After trying elsewhere, unsuccessfully, I came back to SUNY Press, which published *Confronting the Experts* in 1996. It gained a following mainly in academic circles.

Although much has changed since then, my main conclusions still seem relevant: establishment experts are powerful, critique is also powerful, and there is limited support for public debate. There is still much to learn from the personal stories of those who have acquired the

knowledge and skills to challenge establishment experts.

The case studies in *Confronting the Experts* predated the massive expansion of the Internet. With websites and social media, it is now far easier for counter-experts to make their ideas available, but having an impact is still difficult. For establishments, the same methods continue to be standard: ignore challengers if possible; if they receive too much attention, try to censor, discredit or otherwise marginalise them.

Another development is the alarm about 'post-truth', in which assumptions underlying knowledge systems are part of what is contested. The alarm is fostered by defenders of establishments, whose authority seems to be under threat. These days, there are many more voices competing for attention, especially on social media. One consequence is that counter-experts who are careful and rigorous have a harder time standing out from the welter of critical voices.

In recent years, several of the contributors have died: Edward Herman, Harold Hillman, Michael Mallory and Gordon Moran. Those of us remaining are 25 years older. It would be wonderful to see a new generation telling their stories of how to go about confronting the experts.

Today's complex society is increasingly dependent on experts – civil engineers, surgeons, taxation lawyers, computer programmers, economists, and many others. These experts are usually defined by their credentials and their solidarity with mainstream professional bodies. Those who oppose them often do not have the same credibility, although they may have the same levels of knowledge and experience.

The book to which this is the editorial introduction contains first-hand accounts from individuals, each of whom has made a challenge to a body of experts. The authors tell about their motivations, their methods, their successes and failures, and the attacks mounted against them. There are some eye-opening stories here, especially in what they reveal about the behaviour of establishment experts and the obstacles to open debate. Together, these accounts provide exceptional insight into how to go about challenging the experts.

To introduce this topic, I begin by briefly describing some of my own experiences, before turning to some general considerations. My first major confrontation with experts began in 1976 when I moved to Canberra, the national capital of Australia, and became involved in the campaign against nuclear power and uranium mining. The issue was one of the most prominent of the day: a major environmental inquiry into uranium mining was under way and the government's position was yet to be finalised. As a result, there were numerous media stories. Schools and community groups were eager for speakers. One way I became involved was through the letters to the editor of the city's sole daily newspaper, the *Canberra Times*, which published numerous contributions both for and against nuclear power and uranium mining.

The most prominent and regular pro-nuclear contributor was Sir Ernest Titterton, Professor of Nuclear Physics at the Australian National University, whose involvement with and advocacy of nuclear technology dated from the 1940s. As a local, high-status authority, Sir Ernest could easily get his articles and letters published. Other prominent pro-nuclear contributors were Sir Philip Baxter, former head of the Australian Atomic Energy Commission, and Mr John Grover, a mining engineer.

I composed my letters and articles with care, checking all details with knowledgeable friends.[2] Debate through the letters column was not something for the faint-hearted. I remember the queasy feeling in my stomach the first few times I was directly criticised by later correspondents. How unfair, yet how clever, their arguments sometimes were! There was so much to say in response. Yet, how could I say it all in my next letter, in just a few hundred words, and yet not lose new readers by squabbling over minor details?

Most of the debate was about the role of the civil nuclear power industry in the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the safety of nuclear technology, the economics of uranium mining, and the viability of alternatives to nuclear power. The topic of expertise also came up. Sir Ernest asserted that virtually all experts supported nuclear power, and that opponents were 'a small group of anti-uranium operators who miss no opportunity of spreading their propaganda'.[3] Sir Philip presented a more paranoid position, claiming that the anti-nuclear movement was infiltrated by communists; he was also highly derogatory of individual opponents. John Grover repeatedly made the point that the vast majority of scientists and engineers supported nuclear power, while only a discontented minority opposed it.

The nuclear establishment's argument, that experts know best and that most nuclear experts supported nuclear power, was a challenging one, for it was certainly true that most nuclear experts *did* support nuclear power. In replying to these arguments, I had one advantage: I was a scientist myself. My recent Ph.D. was in theoretical physics, though not in nuclear physics. But I knew enough science to realise that the nuclear debate was *not* primarily about nuclear expertise. The key issues – environmental hazards, nuclear proliferation, civil liberties in a nuclear society, economics of uranium mining, centralisation of political and economic power in a nuclearised world, the impact of uranium mining on Aboriginal communities, and alternatives to nuclear power – involved political, economic, social, cultural and ethical dimensions.

My response to the 'experts-know-best' argument had several strands. First, I pointed out that the so-called experts often had made mistakes in the past. Why should the public trust them now? Secondly, I argued that expertise in nuclear science and engineering was not central in the nuclear debate. Did knowledge of neutron scattering cross-sections really give one a special right to pronounce on energy options? Thirdly, I claimed that the experts had a vested interest in supporting nuclear power, because it was compatible with their careers and worldview.

This confrontation with pro-nuclear experts was illuminating. It was challenging enough for me just to debate the issue through articles and letters in the newspaper. I was very impressed when some of my friends in the anti-nuclear movement engaged in public debate with Sir Ernest or some other pro-nuclear speaker. It took real courage to tackle an experienced, self-confident (or, some would say, arrogant), high-prestige scientist in open debate.

There is no doubt that Sir Ernest, Sir Philip and others did have high prestige in the wider community. Their knighthoods, their eminent positions and their long influence in government policy-making gave them a big head-start in any debate. In the mid 1970s, the idea that Australia's rich uranium deposits should not be mined – when there was plenty of money to be made doing it – was considered radical, if not entirely foolish. Most of us in the anti-nuclear movement were young and without high formal status. However good our arguments were, we started at a disadvantage in relation to the pro-nuclear experts.

Things were even more difficult in small country towns. Confronted by a visiting pro-nuclear expert, the local anti-nuclear activists were hard pressed to mount an effective response. With an awareness of such situations, I decided to apply my developing social-science skills to writing a critique of the views of the leading proponents of nuclear power. An abundance of material led me to focus initially on Sir Ernest and Sir Philip. I tracked down all their articles I could find, using newspaper clipping services, the National Library, abstracting services and citations. Then I analysed their views on nuclear power, nuclear weapons and the nuclear debate. It was no surprise to find that the views of these nuclear experts were closely linked to their professional positions. For example, Sir Ernest and Sir Philip in the 1960s admitted a connection between civil nuclear power and proliferation of nuclear weapons, because they hoped to keep open the option of Australian nuclear weapons, whereas in the 1970s they denied this connection, since proliferation had become a central argument against nuclear power. My booklet provided a

convenient compendium of quotations and critical comment.[4]

My experience in the nuclear debate gave me some understanding of how to go about challenging a body of experts. It also made me aware of how important and how difficult this could be. The nuclear debate stimulated my interest in the social role of experts, in how experts gain and exercise power, and how they can be challenged. This continuing interest led me to investigate various academic studies of experts, to read many revealing exposés of establishment positions, and to prepare a handbook on methods for challenging experts.[5] But none of these provides much help to those who would like some insight into what it takes to *be* a critic of dominant experts. That is why my book *Confronting the Experts* seemed worthwhile.[6] It aims to provide insight into the hazardous business of questioning the dominant experts.

Experts Are Important

It hardly needs mentioning that experts play a crucial role in modern society. If the term 'expert' is used in the everyday sense of a person who knows a lot about a subject or can do a task extremely well, then there are experts of all varieties, from bricklayers to brain surgeons, and from cooks to computer analysts. Experts in this sense are skilled people.

But there is another sense of 'expert' which involves an additional dimension. This occurs when a group of skilled people is able to convince others that they are *the* exclusive authorities in an area. Bricklayers and cooks have seldom been able to do this: they are rarely quoted in the media concerning policies on housing design or diet. The groups that have succeeded in making their claims to expertise an avenue for considerable power, status and authority include doctors, lawyers, scientists, engineers and economists. These occupational groups – commonly called professions – have been able to expand their influence and status beyond what might be expected on the basis of the skills possessed by their individual members. These groups thus can be said to have succeeded in the 'political mobilisation of expertise', where 'political' is used here in the broad sense of involving the exercise of power.[7]

'Political expertise' is a familiar feature of Western societies. We are all used to hearing authorities pronounce on various issues. Economists make statements on the economy; doctors make statements about diet. I encountered it in the nuclear debate when Sir Ernest and Sir Philip, on the basis of their position as eminent nuclear scientists, made what they considered to be authoritative statements on energy policy, including fossil fuels and renewable energy sources.

Actually, the preferred role of most experts is behind the scenes, quietly doing their job. Almost all scientists and engineers work for government, industry or universities. Doctors and lawyers are more likely to have private practices. There are two points that are important here. First, most experts are closely tied to powerful interest groups. Secondly, these groups are seldom challenged in fundamental ways, and therefore experts do not need to take their case to the public. (There are exceptions to this pattern, however, such as some issues of foreign policy, where the experts need to continually present their views and seek to monopolise the discussion.)

Nuclear scientists and engineers worked behind the scenes for several decades – the 1940s until the early 1970s – without having to justify their support for nuclear technology. This was because many governments supported nuclear research, nuclear electric power and, in quite a number of cases, nuclear weapons. When, in the 1970s, a citizens' movement against nuclear power developed, quite a number of these scientists and engineers joined the public debate. They presented themselves as the experts.

This is the usual pattern. Most doctors or civil engineers just get on with the job, most of them working where the pay and conditions are most attractive, committed in their own way to doing a good job. Only occasionally is there some challenge to professional status or conditions: a plan for national health insurance, or the

environmental and health damage from a large dam. In such circumstances, a few vocal doctors or engineers are likely to take the lead in defending what they see to be the interests of the profession as a whole.

So here is the general picture: the dominant group of experts in any field is usually closely linked to other power structures, typically government, industry or professional bodies. The links are cemented through jobs, consultancies, access to power and status, training and other methods.

Few people would object to such links if the experts were always right. But they aren't. There are many examples where – at least according to later judgements – the dominant experts have backed wrong ideas, dubious or corrupt practices, and illegitimate vested interests. For example, geologists for decades rejected the theory of continental drift. The idea that continents could move was considered eccentric, and those who treated it seriously were treated with suspicion. Yet now continental drift is the accepted theory.

In the early 1930s in the midst of the economic depression, the standard economic view in industrialised countries was that government expenditure should be reduced. Later economists, following the views of J.M. Keynes, saw government intervention as particularly necessary in such times. Military experts provide another example. During the 1960s, US military experts regularly proclaimed that US military involvement in Vietnam could soon be decreased because their communist opponents were nearly defeated. Just as regularly, their forecasts turned out to be completely wrong.

There are certainly plenty of examples showing that individual experts can be wrong.[8] That's only to be expected. After all, anyone can be wrong, even an expert. The important situation is when a whole body of experts is linked to a powerful institution – government, industry, profession, church, etc. – and the expertise is systematically used to serve the institution at the expense of the public interest. When influential experts are wrong in this situation, then it is serious indeed.

This can happen on a regular basis, so long as there is no challenge to the expert claims. An unopposed body of experts has great influence in justifying policies and practices. Enter the critic. When even a single expert disagrees and is able to reach a substantial audience, whether professionals or a wider public, there is no longer unanimity. Instead of an expert monologue, there is now a debate between differing experts. Critics thus have a disproportionate impact on the public perception of an issue. Experts can no longer remain in the background with their positions safe from scrutiny. A few of them, at least, must join the fray to ensure that the critics do not become too influential.

The critics, because they can puncture the appearance of unanimity, often come under attack. They may be slandered, have their publications blocked, or lose their jobs. This may sound extreme, but it is all too common. I started studying the topic of 'suppression of intellectual dissent' in the late 1970s. It didn't take long to find that suppression of dissent is a pervasive phenomenon. Indeed, it seems to be a key means by which dissent among experts is discouraged.[9] (The other important means are rewards for conformity – jobs, promotions, awards – and professional acculturation into a standard picture of the world.)

The contributors to my book *Confronting the Experts* are prominent critics of establishment experts. They have taken the courageous and dangerous step of openly and persistently questioning the dominant position. As a result, they have encountered an array of hostile attacks on their credibility and sometimes their careers.

Why are the experiences of these critics worth telling? For one thing, they are simply amazing stories. But, more importantly, society needs more such critics. Without critics, expert establishments have too much power and, as Lord Acton's saying puts it so well, 'power tends to corrupt'.[10] In order to promote a more open

and participatory society, it is crucial that dissident views be heard.

The philosophy behind this book is that society will be better off if more people are able and willing to openly question standard views. This holds true even if critics, by later judgement, turn out to be wrong. What is important is the process of open debate. When debate is inhibited or squashed, the potential for abuse of power is magnified enormously.

It is useful to remember that what we today think of as progress resulted from the overthrow of widely and passionately held beliefs linked to powerful vested interests. The promotion of public hygiene, the abolition of slavery and the challenge to women's oppression, among others, each took place in the face of powerful forces backed up by esteemed experts.

When I invited individuals to write chapters for *Confronting the Experts*, I asked them to give a personal account of how they went about confronting establishment experts. Surprisingly, there were few role models I could give them. There are, to be sure, a number of accounts attacking particular bodies of experts, such as Rachel Carson's classic *Silent Spring* and Ralph Nader's classic *Unsafe at Any Speed*.[11] Yet these works give little information about how the critic collected evidence, put it together and built a persuasive case.[12] There is also a body of academic literature dealing with experts and expertise. But I find it of little use for a practical understanding of what is involved in mounting a critical attack against experts.

When I set about inviting contributors and case studies, I had several criteria. One was the existence of a powerful establishment position with recognised experts or expertise, such as the nuclear industry, orthodox medicine and mainstream political opinion. Secondly, I looked for critics who had devoted a major effort to attacking the experts rather than primarily presenting their own particular alternative position. Finally, I looked for cases in which the dominant experts had responded in a way which revealed the nature of the establishment with which they were linked. The contributors and case studies all satisfy these requirements well.

Sharon Beder (in 'Sewerage treatment and the engineering establishment') deals with an engineering establishment that set the parameters for the Sydney sewerage system over many decades. Engineering establishments are incredibly influential in shaping the infrastructure of society: roads, rail, electricity, telephone, water, ports, computer networks and others. These are not just technical matters: there are questions of power and wealth involved, as well as the direct involvement of corporate and government vested interests. But these political and economic dimensions are usually hidden behind a façade of technical expertise which is seldom considered something for public debate. Beder investigated and exposed the operation of one such engineering establishment, helping to force it, kicking and screaming, into the public eye.

In 'Fluoridation: breaking the silence barrier', **Mark Diesendorf** tells about his challenge to the dental and medical experts who support fluoridation. Issues affecting people's health often provoke intense interest and debates, as testified by the prominence of diverse issues concerning cigarette smoking, cholesterol, AIDS, vitamins and cancer. Experts are involved in these and many other areas, and many of these experts are influenced by powerful interest groups, including pharmaceutical companies, industrial polluters, and the medical and dental professions. Promoters of fluoridation are an especially powerful and well-organised establishment. Diesendorf, one of the world's leading anti-fluoridation scientists, revealed much about this establishment through his potent challenge to it.

Edward Herman ('Terrorism: the struggle against closure') has challenged the scholars, commentators, politicians and government functionaries who have defined 'terrorism' in a way convenient to Western governments. It is a simple fact that most organised killing in the world today is done at the behest of governments, either in wars or by repressive governments against their own citizens. This is

forgotten or obscured when 'terrorism' is defined as the action of small anti-government groups or a few renegade governments. This is one example of how Western governments systematically shape popular perceptions of political reality, and are thus able to escape proper scrutiny of their actions. Herman is an eminent scholar and also a committed partisan who has done as much as anyone to expose the double standards of the 'terrorism' establishment experts – though this task is enormous, considering the power and ideological sway of national security establishments.

Harold Hillman started off just doing biological research, and ended up confronting an enormously powerful biology research establishment. In spite of popular views to the contrary, scientific research is an incredibly conservative enterprise: innovation of particular sorts is welcomed, but challenges to fundamental principles are typically rejected out of hand. The reason is simple: many prestigious and not-so-prestigious scientists have an enormous stake in the prevailing set of ideas and directions. In his chapter '"What price intellectual honesty?" asks a neurobiologist', Hillman reveals much about the power of scientific research establishments in his challenge to long-held assumptions about standard methods for biological research.

Michael Mallory and **Gordon Moran** ('The Guido Riccio controversy in art history') questioned the standard interpretation of a single art work, and thereby came up against the full force of an art-history establishment. To some, it might seem that not as much is at stake in the arts as in engineering or government policy, but the same processes apply. Art history is one facet of the more general process of creating and certifying ways of understanding human culture. Various 'culture experts' have set themselves up as the authorities in this process, and it is as difficult to challenge orthodoxy here as anywhere else. What is at stake is primarily careers, status and cultural self-understandings. Mallory and Moran were led into a continuing engagement with an art history establishment which, through its reactions, revealed more about itself than about the art work in question.

Dhirendra Sharma ('Confronting the nuclear power structure in India') challenged the czars of nuclear power and nuclear weapons in India and, as a result, was targeted for attack. In numerous countries around the world, nuclear technology has been supported by powerful forces in government and industry and opposed by citizen groups. A few experts have had the courage to speak out against nuclear developments, and many of them have been attacked for doing so. In India, the task has been especially difficult because of the close personal links between the nuclear establishment and powerful figures in government and industry who had shown their capacity to silence dissent. Another difficulty is the lack of any tradition within India's scientific community of speaking out in the public interest. Sharma paid a serious price for his dissent, but even so he may have been fortunate that the price was not even higher.

I think that each of these critics has a strong case, otherwise I would not have invited their contributions to the book. However, the point of *Confronting the Experts* as a whole is not to argue that each of these critics is correct and each of the establishments is wrong, but instead to provide insight into the process of confronting an expert establishment, including insight into the operation of the establishment, and into successful and unsuccessful methods of mounting a challenge to it.

Reading these accounts, especially the stories of attacks against the critics, makes it tempting to think of expert establishments as unscrupulous conspiracies. Personally, I prefer a different interpretation. Within establishments, the dominant view is so taken for granted that a radically different viewpoint is virtually inconceivable, and certainly has no credibility. This means that the critics are easy to dismiss as ignorant or dangerous, or both; and furthermore, the methods used against them are seen as necessary to protect a worthwhile enterprise. It has long been my view that nearly everyone has the best of intentions, and I believe that the stories told here are compatible with this view. The stories can be interpreted as struggles between groups and individuals, each of which believes they are defending or promoting

important truths. But some of the contributors may disagree with me on this!

A big challenge faces any expert writing for a general audience: how can the material be made understandable without sacrificing accuracy and rigour? This applies to an even greater extent to critics of experts. (Make no mistake, these critics are experts themselves. They simply disagree with the establishment position.) The views of the critics are much more likely to be unfamiliar to others, and therefore more space is needed for them to explain things, since less can be taken for granted.

As a result, some of the book's chapters contain difficulties for some readers. Those without scientific training may find parts of Harold Hillman's chapter difficult. Those without familiarity with the visual arts may find parts of Michael Mallory and Gordon Moran's chapter challenging. My advice is to not get stuck on difficult parts. There is plenty of valuable material even for those with no knowledge of the field. Technical detail has been kept to a minimum. For those specialists who want *more* information, plenty of references are cited in each chapter.

There are a number of biases in my selection of contributors. There are numerous critics whose stories would be worth telling, and I managed to obtain contributors from a range of fields. Other problems were harder to overcome. A gender balance is difficult to achieve, and would be somewhat artificial, because in many fields most experts, critics or otherwise, are men. For example, virtually every leading figure in the fluoridation debate is a man. Another, related, bias is my selection of individual critics. Some of the most important challenges to establishment experts come from collective endeavors, most notably within the feminist movement.[13] Yet another bias is my restriction to English-language critics.

To these and other biases I plead guilty. The extenuating circumstance is the importance of the task. I hope that *Confronting the Experts* will encourage other critics to tell their stories. More importantly, I hope these stories will encourage some readers to become critics themselves, and to undertake the challenging and stimulating task of confronting the establishment experts.

Learning from Struggle

Each of the book's chapters, then, describes a challenge to a powerful establishment. Since I invited most of the contributors independently of each other, they do not necessarily agree with the positions or methods adopted by the others. What they have in common is the experience of challenging the experts.

Drawing on these case studies, I wish to make three main points. The first is that it is incredibly difficult to dent an establishment position. A second important message, in direct contrast, is that even a few critics can make an enormous difference. The third message is that most people are excessively acquiescent, and that more should be done to increase the possibilities of debate.

I The Power of Establishments

Establishment experts are in a powerful position. Typically, they have superior numbers, prestigious positions, high credibility with the media and the public, control over professional and academic journals, and links with powerful groups. Faced by a challenge, their usual initial response is simply to ignore it. **Harold Hillman**, for example, published many papers critical of biological orthodoxy, but for many years it appeared that no one took any notice. Only an establishment can get away with this. The standard view is so completely taken for granted that critics are assumed to be misguided.

When a critique is 'ignored', often there is suppression involved, such as the prevention of publication in key journals or a refusal to review writings by critics in suitably prominent fashion. In other words, to say that the critique can be 'ignored' often means that suppression is working in a quiet, behind-the-scenes fashion. If, in spite of this, critics become too noisy, too credible or too influential, then they are liable to be suppressed in a more overt and heavy-handed

fashion, for example by personal attacks on the dissident.

This is a pattern found over and over again in challenges to expert establishments. For example, when Hillman simply published his critiques of standard methods in biology in scientific journals – and often, *that* was hard enough to achieve – other scientists could simply decline to take notice. But when he issued challenges in prestigious scientific meetings or obtained publicity in the media, then 'quiet' suppression was not enough. He was met by deceitful 'refutations' of his views, bureaucratic slights and 'mistakes' that hindered presentation of his views at scientific meetings, and a major threat to his laboratory and his academic career. His experiences are replicated repeatedly in other challenges to establishments, though with innumerable variations depending on the situation and issue.

If being ignored or being suppressed were the major problems in confronting establishment experts, this would not be such a difficult business. There is something more involved: vested interests behind the establishment position. Indeed, vested interests are crucial in making a position into one called an 'establishment'.[14]

For example, **Edward Herman** confronted not just a few establishment experts on terrorism but also an entire political system that benefits from the orthodox position on terrorism. This includes the US government agencies and businesses – including spy agencies, diplomatic corps and multinational corporations – that want to keep on good relations with murderous regimes, and so prefer that the label 'terrorist' be reserved for something else. This establishment provides the sponsorship for intellectuals who defend the orthodox view. All in all, there is enormous material benefit for supporting the standard view on terrorism versus little reward, and possibly a lot to lose, by questioning it.

The link between experts and vested interests is even more obvious in the case of the nuclear establishment in India. **Dhirendra Sharma**, by challenging nuclear policy openly, came up not just against nuclear experts and bureaucrats, but also against a close-knit political and economic elite with a stake in nuclear developments. Indeed, the nuclear scientists and engineers would not have been a formidable force without their connections with some of India's most powerful figures.

Because the power of establishments is so great, many of the most effective critics come from the outside, where they are less tied to the main professional bodies or patronage system. For example, **Sharon Beder** was not a Water Board engineer, **Mark Diesendorf** was not a dentist or doctor, **Edward Herman** was not sponsored by the US government, **Michael Mallory** and **Gordon Moran** were not from Siena or even Italy, and **Dhirendra Sharma** was not a nuclear scientist. Ironically, this independence of vested interests is often criticised as a lack of proper credentials or expertise. When an expert establishment holds sway, being co-opted by the official patronage system actually adds to an expert's credibility.

But it would be too crass to attribute the strength of the establishment simply to money, jobs and power. These are the material foundation for a position; but to be really effective, *psychological* commitment must be involved. In every case, the establishment has a comprehensive worldview to which leading figures are intensely committed. Most of the establishment experts believe that the critics are wrong, misguided and even dangerous – in fact, in the view of many, sufficiently misguided and dangerous to warrant the various actions taken against them.

In the case of terrorism, the establishment experts believe they are addressing the greatest threats to peace and freedom. In the case of sewage, the establishment engineers believe that their approach is the only effective way to proceed. And so on, through every case study.

An establishment based on cynicism would not last long. Most people seek to mesh their beliefs with their actions. An establishment position heavily based on conscious deception or consciously unfair behaviour would quickly lead to defections. Personally, even though I may

consider the behaviour of some experts to be underhand or reprehensible, nevertheless I have always considered them to be sincere – though that sincerity may be based in a worldview quite contrary to mine.

No doubt some establishment experts consciously lie in order to defend orthodoxy, but this should be put in context. The power of rationalisation is enormous, and so it can be expected that most experts (like other people) are likely to adapt their beliefs to a worldview that serves their self-interest. Furthermore, for some, lying occasionally may be a means to a greater end, namely defending a position they *know* is best.

It is the combination of vested interests and commitment to a worldview that makes the establishment position so hard to dent. The material factors (the vested interests) provide the basis for power, and the mental factors (the worldview) provide the willingness to use the power. Critics often begin by thinking that if they can find and demonstrate holes in the arguments used to defend orthodoxy, then its position will collapse. But picking holes in arguments neither changes the vested interests nor, in most cases, undercuts the prevailing worldview. Furthermore, if the critics only occasionally get a chance to be heard, the establishment position may be accepted purely through repetition: it is so often stated that it seems to be 'common sense'. Is it any wonder that critics can so easily be ignored?

II The Power of Critique

The second message from the cases in *Confronting the Experts* is that a small number of critics – sometimes just one – can make an enormous impact. Indeed, suppression of dissent is a signal that dissent can make a difference. If there is no dissent, suppression is not required.

A crucial part of the critic's effectiveness is strong arguments. In every case, the critics have begun by mustering powerful intellectual attacks on the orthodox position. This is not just a matter of moral conviction, of standing up and shouting. 'You're wrong!' in the face of the establishment. No, the secret of every successful critic is good arguments, based on collecting information, carrying out careful analyses, preparing well thought-out written and verbal presentations.

All of this requires a lot of hard work. Reading the case studies is not likely to give a full sense of the amount of work involved. A chapter recounting days in the library would hardly be interesting, and every author inevitably emphasises the more dramatic events in the story. But without the long hours of study and preparation, the highlights would never have occurred.

There seems to be a contradiction in my argument: I said that establishments are held together psychologically through a worldview, and yet I'm saying that the arguments of critics can be effective. How can arguments puncture the worldview? The resolution to this apparent dilemma is that the arguments of critics are most effective in convincing third parties, namely people who are not part of the establishment position. This might be politicians, media, experts in related fields, or members of the 'general public'.

Both establishment experts and critics are engaged in a contest over loyalties. The establishment, by definition, has the advantage of the loyalties of the most powerful and authoritative experts. The establishment, to maintain its power and authority, has to keep it this way. The critics can make inroads by winning over a few recruits, for example from new or marginal members in the orthodox camp, from groups that are not officially part of the establishment, or occasionally even a convert from the mainstream of orthodoxy. In all these cases, arguments can be effective, though they are not enough on their own to win the day.

The visibility of just a few critics turns unanimity, or at least the appearance of complete agreement, into a debate. From the point of view of outsiders, this is enormously important. Instead of the orthodox view being taken for granted, it becomes simply one point of view. This weakens the position of the establishment dramatically. For example, **Sharon Beder**

describes the crisis at the Sydney Water Board when sewerage issues became of widespread interest, with the media reporting critics as well as establishment views.

None of this would make any difference if the critics had only arguments. To be effective, these arguments need to be linked to interest groups, in the same manner that establishment experts are linked to vested interests. For example, the arguments of critics of Sydney sewerage policies were taken up by environmentalists and beach-goers. For establishments, critics alone are not much to worry about. It is their potential to aid and help to mobilise interest groups that is a real threat.

It is for this reason that critics are likely to be attacked. If the credibility of the critics can be undermined, then their threat to establishment legitimacy can be minimised. Each case study has plenty of examples of attempts to discredit dissidents, such as accusing **Dhirendra Sharma** of being a CIA agent, and to suppress them or their work, such as forcing Sharma to move from his science-policy post. But suppression, however damaging it may be for the person or position attacked, can also be counterproductive for the attacker. Suppression can backfire because it is perceived to be unfair. Many people believe, in principle anyway, in the value of open debate. When they are informed that debate is being suppressed, they may become more sympathetic to the suppressed position. **Michael Mallory** and **Gordon Moran** give some excellent examples of this phenomenon.

The key players in these confrontations include the mass media. If the establishment is unquestioned, there is no story. Even a single critic who has sufficient credibility, such as the appropriate credentials, turns the situation into a debate that is, therefore, newsworthy. The media has played a big role in the disputes over sewerage, fluoridation, the Guido Riccio and nuclear power, among others.

The involvement of the media is especially potent in cases where establishment experts normally operate in the background without scrutiny, as in the case of most scientists and engineers. These experts generally detest media coverage. Ironically, it can force them to become more media savvy, as in the case of the Sydney Water Board, which has launched publicity campaigns defending its policies. But at least this visibility also makes the issue more available for debate than before.

The case of terrorism shows a different pattern. Here, a central feature of the establishment position is use of the media to inculcate the orthodox view of terrorism and to authenticate the establishment experts. In this situation, it is not a simple matter for the media to 'open up the debate' because a key part of the 'debate' should be the ways in which the media shape perceptions of terrorism and of expertise about it. In this situation, the 'alternative' media, including community radio and small independent magazines and newspapers, become more important.

As well as the media, there are some other key players. Social movements are vital in a number of cases: the environmental movement in the case of sewerage, the anti-fluoridation movement, the peace and Central American solidarity movements in the case of terrorism, and the anti-nuclear movement. Movements are eager recipients and disseminators of work done by critics. Also important are quiet sympathisers or facilitators of debate. This can include an editor who decides to publish an article by a critic in a journal normally monopolised by the orthodox, or the organiser of a conference who makes a special point of inviting critics as well as defenders of the establishment. Some of these individuals may sympathise with the critics but be unable to make a public stand; others simply believe in the value of open debate. In either case, their efforts, while seldom dramatic, are vitally important in opening up the issue.

To become an effective critic of establishment experts, I think the following are crucial:

- lots of hard work, in order to understand the issues and develop the critique;
- a commitment to accuracy, since critics are more easily attacked and

discredited by errors than are establishment experts;
- a willingness and ability to take the arguments to broad audiences, especially through the media;
- persistence;
- courage to disagree with peers and to continue in the face of attacks; and
- a secure livelihood.

The last item, a secure livelihood, is far from trivial. Many potential critics are deterred because of worries about their jobs. The most secure position is one completely independent of the establishment being confronted. **Edward Herman** is closest to this situation. The most risky position is to attack the establishment that provides one's livelihood. **Harold Hillman** is in this category, and found that even academic tenure was insufficient protection.

In summary, even a single critic can do a lot against a seemingly impregnable establishment. By developing cogent arguments and raising them wherever possible, an undisputed orthodoxy can be turned into a debatable issue. In this, the involvement of a range of individuals and groups is important, including social movements, the media and inside sympathisers. The critic is likely to encounter various forms of suppression but, on the other hand, may be supported by neutral parties who believe in fair play. Finally, in order to become an effective critic, there is a need for hard work, accuracy, taking the arguments to wide audiences, persistence, courage and a livelihood. There is certainly room for more to join their ranks.

III An Acquiescent Society

In any study of critics versus establishments, there is a great temptation to focus on the personalities of the critics. This might be to discredit them by pointing to psychological quirks or to praise them as exceptional human specimens. Of course, personalities are fascinating and worthy of study, but I think it is just as important to ask why there are so few critics. In Western liberal democracies there is much rhetoric about the importance of individual freedom and autonomy; but the reality is that most people are highly reluctant to openly challenge their superiors or even their peers, whether in corporations, governments, professions or whatever. Most people are quite comfortable conforming to the prevailing views.

That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. What is worrying is the limited support for open, vigorous *debate*. The contributors to *Confronting the Experts* each think that their position is correct, but they would not want a dictator to enforce their views by fiat. Rather, their wish is that the issues be debated openly and fully, allowing individuals to make up their own minds. For any society that calls itself free, this seems like an obvious and essential requirement. Honest debate often generates new positions and insights which are not available to any individual or group working within its own framework. Debate is thus essential to any society that aspires to be creative in the widest sense.

As I've indicated, becoming a critic requires a considerable commitment, and is certainly not for everyone. Furthermore, many people are quite satisfied with either the establishment position or a particular alternative position. But there is still an important role for those who do not want to join the debate as participants, and that is to be supporters of *debate* itself. Journalists can do this by seeking out minority viewpoints. Editors of newspapers and journals can do it by being more receptive to submissions by critics, or by setting up special for-and-against columns. Teachers can promote debate by collecting materials by critics to counterbalance establishment experts, and by inviting speakers from both sides of issues. Indeed, anyone can promote debate by organising a public meeting with speakers from different viewpoints, or having a meeting of friends to discuss conflicting writings.

Promoting debate sounds easy in principle but it can be difficult in practice. In most bureaucracies, including corporate, government, church and trade-union bureaucracies, suppression of dissent is the usual pattern.[15] Even within social movements such as the feminist or environmental movements, which themselves are engaged in challenging

establishments, internal criticism is often unwelcome.

To support debate is often seen tantamount to supporting the critics, since debate gives the critics a platform that the establishment would prefer to deny. But this is no excuse for acquiescence. Without debate, no position is worthy of the unreserved support that establishments come to expect. That is precisely why it is necessary for more people to learn how to confront the experts.

Notes

1 Originally published in Brian Martin (ed.), *Confronting the Experts*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1996, pp. 1–12 and 175–83.

2 Mark Diesendorf, a contributor to the book on another topic, was especially knowledgeable and helpful.

3 E.W. Titterton, letter, *Canberra Times*, 30 March 1979, p. 2.

4 Brian Martin, *Nuclear Knights*, Rupert Public Interest Movement, Canberra, 1980.

5 Brian Martin, *Strip the Experts*, Freedom Press, London, 1991.

6 Sharon Beder collaborated in the initial development of the plan for *Confronting the Experts*.

7 On the analysis of professions as systems of power, see Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994; Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, Academic Press, New York, 1979; Charles Derber, William A. Schwartz & Yale Magrass, *Power in the Highest Degree: Professionals and the Rise of a New Mandarin Order*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990; Eliot Freidson, *Professional Dominance: The Social Structure of Medical Care*, Atherton, New York, 1970; Terence J. Johnson, *Professions and Power*, Macmillan, London, 1972; Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977.

8 Christopher Cerf & Victor Navasky, *The Experts Speak: The Definitive Compendium of Authoritative Misinformation*, Pantheon, New York, 1984.

9 Brian Martin, C.M. Ann Baker, Clyde Manwell & Cedric Pugh (eds), *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1986.

10 This insight is confirmed by psychological experiments. See David Kipnis, *The Powerholders*, 2nd edn, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981; David Kipnis, *Technology and Power*, Springer-Verlag, New York, 1990.

11 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Mass., 1962; Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-in Dangers of the American Automobile*, Grossman, New York, 1965.

12 Lois Marie Gibbs, as told to Murray Levine, *Love Canal, My Story*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1982, is good on this issue, but deals much more with establishments than the experts. I thank a referee for mentioning this book and the one by Brint (note 7, above).

13 A prominent example is the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, whose book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New England Free Press, Boston, Mass., 1971, and several later editions) constitutes a major challenge to the male medical establishment. The Collective was too busy to contribute a chapter to *Confronting the Experts*. Their approach is described in, for example, Wendy Coppedge Sanford, Working together growing together: a brief history of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Heresies*, 2 (3), 1979, pp. 83–92.

14 In some cases, the main body of experts is opposed to the primary vested interests, as the case of nuclear-winter scientists versus the military establishment (see Brian Martin, Nuclear winter: science and politics, *Science and Public Policy*, 15 (5) (October), 1988, pp. 321–34). This creates a somewhat different dynamic to the one presented in *Confronting the Experts*.

15 Deena Weinstein, *Bureaucratic Opposition*, Pergamon Press, New York, 1979.

About the contributor

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Appendix

The original contents of *Confronting the Experts* (1996)

1 Introduction: Experts and establishments – *Brian Martin*
2 Sewerage treatment and the engineering establishment – *Sharon Beder*
3 Fluoridation: breaking the silence barrier – *Mark Diesendorf*
4 Terrorism: the struggle against closure – *Edward S. Herman*
5 'What price intellectual honesty?' asks a neurobiologist – *Harold Hillman*
6 The Guido Riccio controversy in art history – *Michael Mallory* and *Gordon Moran*
7 Confronting the nuclear power structure in India – *Dhirendra Sharma*
8 Conclusion: learning from struggle – *Brian Martin*