

This is a sad article. The Borough Council has voted unilaterally to halt any further discussion concerning the proposed low-level radioactive waste storage facility. While I appreciate the thoughtfulness shown by the Council members in reaching this decision, they were unfortunately operating from a set of mistaken premises. Too bad, for it would have been nice to discuss the real risks associated with a low-level radioactive waste storage facility, and compare those risks to alternative (quite possibly more risky) uses of the land. It would have been nice to ascertain the actual movement of property values or trace real population health problems around existing nuclear facilities (the literature reveals surprising conclusions, by the way...). It would have been nice to explore the ethical dimensions to a "NIM-BY" viewpoint, or debate the larger environmental issues involved in the siting process. It would have been nice to remind the Council members that for every "mother and daughter losing sleep" over the rad-waste proposal, there is probably a corresponding Roosevelt family worried about having a home in which to lose sleep. But we can't do these things, because the inquiry was closed, the discussion was killed, the dialogue was stopped.

Perhaps you agree with the Council's decision not to pursue further information gathering about the radioactive waste site. Perhaps the curtailment of discussion was indeed for the "common good" of the community; perhaps it wasn't. No matter, the decision was made. The events leading to that decision, however, were utterly wrong.

I had some strong reactions to those events,



View - points

In / tolerance

By Brad Garton

particularly to the form of the debate that unfolded. What follows are several observations and personal comments about the debate. Obviously, my subjective responses are colored by my direct involvement in the discussion. In the process of sorting out my personal reactions, I have tried to locate these reactions in a wider

frame of reference. I may not have succeeded, but I do know that many of us were deeply affected by the occurrences surrounding the debate.

Personal Reaction Number 1: My most immediate reaction came as a result of the disgusting March 27th meeting with John Weingart and Jeanette Eng (invited to Roosevelt from the Low Level Radioactive Waste Siting Board). The callous and irresponsible behavior of the Roosevelt anti-nuclear fanatics and their goon squad from Millstone was nothing if not appalling. Jeez, from the concentrated effort to interrupt any sharing of information or concerns it would seem that some major blasphemous act was about to be committed. What One True Religion holds sway here in Roosevelt that would justify such destruction of the heathen? Here I thought we had moved to a town with a relatively liberal history, a history steeped in tolerance and open-minded (although often skeptical) acceptance of differing points of view.

Speaking of open minds, I was rather amazed at how quickly minds became closed to any discussion of the rad-waste site. It seems that the words "nuclear" or "radioactive" trigger a mental pathway in some humans that precludes any further discussion, no matter that new information might reveal conclusions far different from the folkloric canon. I've always felt that if we let our intellects be ruled by knee-jerk reactions, then we become a bunch of people walking around with jerky knees. Here I thought we had moved to a town where people could stand tall and proud, no matter what set of political beliefs they held.

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Finally, I was personally repulsed by the impugning of my wife's (Jill Lipoti) integrity by the anti-nuclear monomaniacs (it's probably not appropriate here to discuss exactly what was said to Jill at the March 27th meeting - it was indeed repulsive). Based on her experience and expertise (PhD. in environmental science from Rutgers; five years as the person in charge of the New Jersey Radiation Control Program; a personal and professional commitment to the environment unparalleled by anyone I know), she recommended that we take a serious look at the low-level site. Now follow the simple logic of intolerance: because Jill disagreed with the tenets the One True Anti-Nuclear Faith, she was necessarily branded as being either too stupid to recognize the plain truth (she doesn't have all the FACTS!) or as being motivated by some form of selfish greed ("afraid for your job, Jill?"). How else to reconcile her heretical views? Doggone, if ever there were an expert in the field of radiation protection who would have the best interests of Roosevelt at heart, it would surely seem that Jill, someone who raises her family in the town, would be that person. Because of her dis-

senting opinion, the anti-nuclear advocates completely discounted what she had to offer. Here I thought we had moved to a town where people actually thought about the implications of their statements and the consequences of their actions. I guess I was mistaken.

Personal reaction number 2: I am concerned that the local circumstances related to the rad-waste debate are symptoms of a larger systemic malaise. Admittedly, my reactions to the events surrounding the debate are rather extreme; in particular I don't take kindly to verbal assaults on my family. Even without this added personal dimension, I am quite worried about the future coherence of our society. The vehemence of the personal attacks, disinformation and dissembling rhetoric used by the anti-nuclear opposition seems an instance of a wider social phenomenon; a fundamental insularity that threatens our ability to make consensual decisions.

Our system of government is predicated upon a continuing political dialogue. We discuss, we consider, we choose. Often we get into arguments - and, we surely have seen our share in Roosevelt - but never have I seen thinking people in this town endorse the closure of discourse.

This is exactly what happened with the rad-waste debate. It would seem that the obvious disagreement among many people about the relative merits or problems of the proposed low-level site would suggest that further investigation might be warranted. The absolute fear fostered by the opposition could only be satisfied by a complete lock-out of alternative opinions. Close off information gathering, kill any dissenting knowledge - sheesh, perhaps we should burn all the books as well.

This attitude of intolerance, the employment of "last resort" tactics as standard operating procedure in political debate is strangling civil discourse at all levels of government. Perhaps I'm being overly apocalyptic, but we are now being constantly bombarded by simplified ideologies telling us how to think and what to say. From Rush Limbaugh, Jenny Jones and "Geraldo!" to the horrid contractors of Newt & Co., the muscles of bigotry and intolerance are being exercised. My worry - truly now located here in our own backyard - is that by succumbing to the blinded beliefs of ideologues, we are losing our capacity to act as informed and critical citizens.

The only way to survive in a diverse, multi-cultural (and here I'm using "culture" in a very broad sense) world is through mutual respect and tolerance for dissenting viewpoints. By endorsing the use of a misinformed mob mentality to achieve our goals we run the very real risk of building a world where mob mentality rules supreme. Do we really want to live there?

Personal Reaction Number 3: The incidents that surrounded the rad-waste debate also caused me to take a hard look at my own past actions. I have strong feelings about local (and global) issues, and I often state them as forcefully as I can. I believe in the power of words to change us, and I hope that my exhortations have always conveyed my conviction that an open political process is of paramount importance. I probably suffer from an academic intoxication with language, and it has been easy for me to overlook the context of verbal hostility that I helped to build. If words do indeed have power, then I must certainly apologize for my own contribution to a climate of incivility in town. The extreme polarization that seems to accompany every major political issue confronting us must be addressed if we are to maintain our social integri-

ty. Of course we can continue to maintain deeply rooted beliefs and opinions, but we have to recognize that the form of our actions in the service of those beliefs becomes the foundation of our social structure.

So, I'm not going to mince words now because (to use a slightly paradoxical construction) we must not tolerate intolerance. The unconscionable actions of a few have done real damage to the small society that is our town, and to the greater society that is our country. Am I being overly dramatic? Consider what actually happened in our enlightened borough: John Weingart and Jeanette Eng both received death threats while leaving the March 27th meeting in Roosevelt. My wife's character was viciously assassinated - not by "outsiders", but by our neighbors; people we thought of as friends. Children at our school were pressured into signing an ill-informed, little understood petition and hassled because of their parents' political beliefs. Our collective ability to engage in critical inquiry and reach rational decisions was trashed by a crashing wave of fear and hysteria.

But they - we should be PROUD of all this! The folks who quashed the process are

HEROES! They saved the town from the chimera of NUCLEAR stuff! They should be given MEDALS and AWARDS! I just hope that in their acceptance speeches they remember to explain to the destitute homeowners of Roosevelt how they guaranteed years of economic woe through their unwillingness to even explore a real solution to our tax problem.

Maybe you can put aside the experience of the past few weeks, and maybe we can proceed as a "community" with no acknowledgment of the responsibility we share for what transpired. I can't help but feel a growing sense of shame, however. I am ashamed of the anti-nuclear leaders for engaging the mechanisms of zealotry and demagoguery in their misinformed crusade to convert us all to their quasi-religious belief system. I am ashamed of the people of Millstone for bringing their prejudice and "TV talk-show" tactics into our town. And, I am seriously ashamed of all of us for teaching through our actions the terrible lesson of intolerance to our children. I am profoundly depressed.

