

# The Greening of the Liberals?

Tony Beamish traces the development of green thinking in the party.

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The adjective ‘Green’ is capable (in a political context) of several interpretations. For present purposes it is only necessary to point up the difference between what may be called (light) green, with a small ‘g’, and (dark) Green with a capital ‘G’:

*green*: being genuinely (or ostensibly) concerned about the protection of the natural and man-made environment, and of other species and their habitats, and about the conservation of natural resources. This subsumes *conservationism* and *environmentalism*, and requires no fundamental change in philosophical beliefs.

*Green*: believing that modern societies and economies need to be comprehensively re-structured. According to this view, industrial capitalism is coming to the end of the road; instead of desperately trying to achieve ever greater material output, trade, and sales, we should be seeking a ‘soft landing’ for the system. A shift of emphasis, in fact, from *consumerism* to *conservationism*, from *competition* to *co-operation* and from *global* to *local*. It could be summarised as a shift from *quantitative* to *qualitative* criteria in decision-making – a position which is, of course, quite incompatible with the faith in generalised economic expansionism held by most Western peoples and their governments.

Greens in this sense are also concerned that the world’s population is too large, and feel that any proposal to deal with current social, economic and ecological problems must take this into account.

Andrew Dobson, in his book *Green Political Thought*, writes: ‘If we confuse Green politics (capital ‘G’) with either Conservationism or Environmentalism (these being green with a small ‘g’) then we severely distort and misunderstand the nature of the Green challenge to the political, social, economic and scientific consensus that dominates the late twentieth

century. We are, indeed, in danger of losing sight of the fact that it is a challenge at all.’ In practice, the press and most politicians, even when they are aware of the Green, or ecological, arguments, *do* manage to confuse these two quite different philosophical stances; the radical implications of the (dark) Green case are only appreciated by a small (but growing) minority of people, many of whom now either look to self-defined Green parties for their political representation, or – more commonly – have given up on the political process altogether.

For the Victorians, ‘progress’ (what we would now call ‘economic growth’) was essential, desirable and in normal times achievable, allowing for hiccups when the free market failed to do its job properly. However, it is possible to discern in J. S. Mill’s writings signs that he was actually one of the first Greens; for example, he wrote: ‘It must always have been seen ... by political economists, that the increase in wealth is not boundless: that at the end of what they term the progressive state lies the stationary state, that all progress in wealth is but a postponement of this, and that each step in advance is an approach to it.’<sup>1</sup>

But this view, like its modern equivalent (derisively called ‘no-growth’, with the implied corollary ‘no-good’) was ignored; far from ‘always having been seen by political economists’, it was hardly considered at all. However, other nineteenth century thinkers (not economists) also had reservations about industrialism. William Morris was famous for his stand against it. John Ruskin, too, expressed some green ideas. He wrote, for example: ‘Private enterprise should never be interfered with ... so long as it is indeed “enterprise” ... and so long as it is indeed “private”, paying its own way at its own cost, and in no wise harmfully affecting public comforts or interests. But “private enterprise” which poisons its neighbourhood, or speculates for individual gain at common risk, is very sharply to be interfered with.’<sup>2</sup>

Such sentiments were not appreciated by

society at large, nor by the nascent Liberal Party, simply because the nineteenth century was not a green century, let alone a Green one. People and parties were fixated with 'progress'; social and even moral advances were seen as the natural concomitants of economic growth. For a hundred years both greenness and Greenness were to be considered (if they were considered at all) to be idealistic and 'woolly'. The Liberal Party went with the flow; 'economic liberalism' was the name of the game. Laissez-faire and the competitive spirit could justifiably be constrained by governmental intervention only on grounds of justice, equity, or what are now called human rights. The environment was there to provide the wherewithal for wealth creation, and there was plenty of environment available. That was what life was all about; the spirit of the age simply was not green, and the Liberals could not be blamed for something outside their world view.

Even so, some of the great social and economic reforms of the nineteenth century, introduced by the Liberals, had an element of environmental justification; but these reforms were not in any sense Green; the idea that 'modern society ... needed to be comprehensively restructured' would have been ridiculed. Green ideas, in fact, were not part of the philosophy of the public at large or of any political party until well after the second world war. However, it is worth noting that, although it contained nothing which would be thought of as Green nowadays, the famous 'Yellow Book' of 1928 did include a strong defence of the countryside and advocated the idea of National Parks.

An important part of the expansionary world view was the notion of free trade. The great economic debates of the nineteenth century were very largely to do with the relative merits of free trade, which was, of course, one of the founding principles of Liberalism, and of its perceived antithesis, protectionism. But Maynard Keynes, the Liberal who did more to revolutionise economic

thinking than anyone since Marx – and who, it must be added, changed his ideas from time to time – wrote: 'Ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality, travel – these are things which should of their nature be international. But *let goods be homespun wherever it is reasonably and conveniently possible*; and, above all, *let finance be primarily national*. We do not wish, therefore, to be at the mercy of world forces working out, or trying to work out, some uniform equilibrium according to the ideal principles, if they can be called such, of laissez-faire capitalism. We wish ... to be as free as we can make ourselves from the interference of the outside world ... [I] sympathise with those who would *minimise*, rather than ... *maximise*, economic entanglement among nations.'<sup>3</sup>

Keynes was one of the architects of the post-second war settlement which, in the foundation of the GATT, acknowledged the need to build up the international economy; but the International Trade Organisation he wanted, with the power to regulate and control international trade, never materialised. (The WTO which was set up a few years ago puts increases in trade above all other considerations, environmental or social, and it is a bold government which argues against it.)

By the early 1960s, when it was possible for Macmillan to claim that 'we had never had it so good', society at large, including the Liberal Party, was locked into the unGreen, materialistic view that production, trade and consumption were all 'good things'. Not only should increases in them be encouraged, but attempts to limit them, for any reason, were deplored as 'protectionism'. At about the same time, however, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* appeared, the first of many 'doomwatch' books pointing out one or other hitherto unremarked disadvantages of indiscriminate economic and technological 'progress'. In effect, the grounds of the great right/left division between conservatives and radicals (which will, of course, always be with us) have

now been extended. In the nineteenth century the term political economy was commonly used, and in the twentieth politicians have taken for granted the over-riding importance of economics. But people are now beginning to realise not only that 'the economy' forms just a part – Greens would say 'too great a part' – of the world's ecosystem, but also that economic considerations are playing too big a part in our polity. Consequently, it is time to start thinking and talking about *political ecology*.

When the Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth* was published in 1972, a serious case for Green economics (and therefore politics) was made. With Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* and *The Ecologist's Blueprint for Survival*, it made a substantial impact on the thinking of many people. So it was in the early 1970s that the Liberal Party, like some sections of the public, began to face up to the challenge of green – and even Green – ideas.<sup>4</sup> In 1972, a committee under the chairmanship of Stina Robson produced a *Report on the Environment*, marking the real beginning of the greening – and the Greening – of the party. In its introduction, the 'over-riding problems' were summarised as:

1. Population growth.
2. Pollution.
3. Economic growth as measured in terms of GNP.
4. The finite resources of the world.

These problems are well displayed in the body of the document, which was certainly responsible for substantial advances in the party's thinking, except for point 1 – always a problem for Liberals!

A few milestones will give the picture:

The 1970 election manifesto contained almost nothing on any subject which might be classed as green, but there was a brief reference to 'the dangers of pollution and the damage we have done to the environment.' The Young Liberals' list of speakers did not include any people (inside or outside the party) claiming to speak on environment/

conservation/ecological topics.

Although the 1974 (February) manifesto contained sections on quality of life, the energy crisis, 'the environment' and transport, the establishment omitted them from the 1974 (October) manifesto. They were, however, prominent in the Young Liberals' manifesto, and the YLs' list also contained many speakers on green topics.

1977 saw the foundation of the Liberal Ecology Group, and David Steel said it was 'cheaper to save a barrel of oil than to produce an extra one'. The 1979 booklet *Your Future with the Liberals*, by Desmond Banks, included Assembly resolutions on the environment, transport and energy from the late 1970s. Also in 1979 the Margate Assembly passed the famous resolution declaring that 'economic growth, as measured by GDP, is neither desirable nor achievable' – it must be noted, against some opposition!

In 1980 Michael Meadowcroft, in *Liberal Values for a New Decade*, wrote: 'It is essential for Liberals to emphasise the urgent need to adapt lifestyles, living standards and future consumption patterns ... declining resources [are] being used up at a rate which cannot be sustained'; and Tim Beaumont wrote in *The Yellow Brick Road*: 'To be a liberal in the next hundred years will be profoundly difficult. It will involve essentially the ability to resist pressure from two sides, both of which will be largely right. One side will insist with more and more evidence that the continuation of human civilised life needs draconian measures, that the production of more children or the wastage of more resources cannot under any circumstances be allowed. The other side will insist, with

desperate intensity, that it is a betrayal of everything liberals stand for to increase ... limitations on human freedom ... We are moving in the right direction. The only question is whether we will achieve our aims within a Democratic society or not. It is the job of Liberals to see that we do.'

1981 saw the arrival of the SDP on the political scene, and its alliance with the Liberal Party. This had very little to do with the rise of green political thinking in general, but it is possible that the negotiations which led to the final merger in 1988

NGOs and charities such as Friends of the Earth and Oxfam, and their political proxies like the YLs and LEG, were realising that many of the obvious failings of the industrialised world were directly due to the prevailing economic attitude, the political and media establishments (including the Lib Dem establishment) continued to treat the green arguments as peripheral. But numerous articles in *New Outlook* and *Radical Quarterly*, and many pamphlets, demonstrated the growing awareness of Liberals of the need for 'sustainable development' – the new term which gained currency in the Brundtland Report.

It is worth pointing out the distinction between 'development' and 'growth', two terms which are often thought to be interchangeable. Briefly, 'development' can be thought of as qualitative change, and 'growth' as quantitative; it is easy to conceive of a cancerous 'growth' or of an entity which 'develops' into something smaller – but that is not to deny that the two often go together! Unfortunately, the Brundtland term was often distorted (not only by Liberals) into

'sustainable growth'; and that, nonsensically, was interpreted as 'growth which can be sustained indefinitely'. This, of course, negated the whole point of the phrase.

During this period, Green activists felt that the establishment (and many local activists) were very pale 'green' or even 'anti-green'. There was even some friction between them and 'communitarian radicals'. One point the two sorts of radicals did agree on, however, was that all nuclear activity, both civil and military, should be halted as soon as possible. (There was, of course, a substantial 'non-radical' rump who disa-



Paddy Ashdown defends Liberal Democrat green credentials against Mrs Thatcher's 'conversion' in 1988 (*Guardian*, 30 September 1988).

helped to clarify the thinking of many Liberals. The Liberal Ecology Group addressed an open letter (concerning the new party's constitution) to the Liberal negotiating team, pointing out that the SDP's political philosophy was based on the old 'grey' economic view, while that of the Liberals incorporated some 'green' elements. Whether in response to this or not, the new party's constitution was even 'greener' than the old Liberal one.

During the Thatcher years the 'grey-green' debate (within the party as in society at large) developed in a curiously one-sided way. While

greed, and still disagree, with this view.) The establishment continued to plug the old line of 'rebuilding the economy'; in 1984 the Liberal Treasury Affairs Panel published a document (*Managing the Economy*) which showed little awareness of the ecological crisis. When the YLs produced an Assembly motion attacking the party's economic policy (largely on ecological grounds) they were accused by David Steel of being Marxists! And at a one-day conference on 'People, Prosperity and Politics' in 1988, organised by LINK, only one main speaker stressed a green approach, and the few references to it from participants were shrugged off.

It is hard to see just why the 'thinking' elements in the party were so slow to adopt a green stance; I believe that the prospect of improving our public image and of attracting more votes, which was a plausible idea in the 1980s, was thought to depend on a radical stance in non-economic matters, but a conventional one as far as economics was concerned. We stressed a 'middle way' between high capitalism ('Thatcherism') and centralised state control of the economy ('socialism'). What we did not take on board was that, while the great majority of the public agreed with us, Labour was already seen as 'the middle way' by the majority. What is more, our 'non-economic' radicalism had limited voter appeal and Labour was a far more plausible non-Tory alternative. The environment was not perceived by the party as an economic issue – as it was not by the public itself – and, what was worse, we did not link the need for green policies with our other non-economic principles such as localism, freedom of speech and information, or civil liberties.

In fact, public opinion during the 1980s and 1990s has shifted very substantially. It was the European elections in 1989 which made the party really take notice of this shift; only in Cornwall did the Social & Liberal Democrats attract more votes than the Green Party. The first-past-the-post electoral system hit both the

SLD and the Green Party, of course; but the old jibe of 'only a protest vote', so often aimed at the Liberals, showed that the public thought the Green case was worth more of a protest than ours.

The realisation in the party that green issues had public resonance led to a lot of rethinking of detailed policy during the 1990s; communitarian issues (such as traffic congestion, health, and fuel poverty) were seen to be clearly linked to green concerns, and new ideas like resource taxation (especially a carbon tax) were taken on board. The party now regards growth of GDP as only a partial, and rather unsatisfactory, measure of socio-economic well-being, and is looking at the Index of Sustainable Welfare to supplement it.

These shifts in the policy stance of the party were not, of course, merely a populist response to the shift in public perceptions; there had been a lot of thinking and debate within the party. MPs such as Simon Hughes, Matthew Taylor, and Paul Tyler, and many candidates, were quick to see the voter appeal and the essential rightness of ideas which had been, politically speaking, the property of the Green Party for years, and were not afraid to advocate them. At the local level, many Lib Dem councils have now taken up such ideas as recycling or integrated local traffic and transport schemes; but there seems to be a prevalent idea that that's as far as we need to go. But at least the terms of the debate within some council groups (and, I believe, in the higher echelons of the party) have shifted. It is now a matter of pride that we are the only effective *green* party.

But just how *Green* are we? As one of the original Greens I can see some signs of movement, but note that there are many in the party who argue, in effect, that we have gone quite far enough towards an environmental stance, and some of my attempts to recruit more members for the Green Liberal Democrats have been quite rudely rebuffed.

Tim Beaumont said at the 1997

spring conference in Cardiff: 'We have completed the first part of the task, which is to become a green party; we now have to face up to the much bigger challenge, which is to become a Green party, with a capital "G".' This, in my opinion, is where we have to talk in terms of the end of an era. The underlying theme of the Industrial Age is expansion; the necessary theme of the post-industrial age we are now entering is conservation. These two themes are, as I suggested in my first paragraph, quite incompatible, unless they are interpreted and adopted with great care. As Sidney Smith said, hearing two women shouting at each other from the top windows of houses on opposite sides of the street: 'Those two women will never agree; they are arguing from different premises.' We are in danger of joining those women; the trouble is that the arguments of the conventional expansionists are so insistent – and so much in tune with what the consumer wants to hear – that the radical conserver is unheard.

How far is the party's reaction to green/Green ideas part of the general culture of our time, and how far is it specifically Liberal? There is little doubt that at the level of *green* ideas we are in the lead; we are in step with many of the green pressure groups and have been praised by many of the leading green commentators. But when it comes to the adoption of a truly *Green* philosophy, I regret that for many of us our Liberalism prevents us from seeing the wood for the trees. We are so locked into the idea that freedom is what matters that we regard any suggestion that things will have to be different from now on as a gross interference with individual liberties, and a denial of our long-standing faith in technological progress.

This is not just a matter of rural MPs objecting to an increase in petrol duty, or gut resistance to the idea of any kind of protectionism; it is much more fundamental. The industrial ethos has developed into a frame of mind which puts immediate gratification before long-term stability;

and politicians are notoriously prone to think in terms of one, perhaps two, parliaments. What is more, we are conditioned to believing in the 'technical fix'. C. S. Lewis, in 1954, asked: 'How has it come about that we use the highly emotive word *stagnation*, with all its malodorous and malarial overtones, for what other ages would have called *permanence*? Our assumption that everything is provisional and soon to be superseded, that the attainment of goods we have never yet had, rather than the defence and conservation of those we have already, is the cardinal business of life, would most shock and bewilder [our ancestors].'

At this time of new changes in attitudes, when we are beginning to question the 'assumption' just quoted, the party seems to be reluc-

tant to come out in the open and argue that, if we as a species are to survive, the peoples of the advanced countries are going to have to learn to make themselves happy while using fewer of the world's resources, instead of always seeking to use more. Since I am here on the edge of a completely different article (a piece about the economics of the future rather than the Greening of the Liberals) I will end by suggesting that the politics of the future will be about the end of the industrial age one way or another: will it be possible to achieve a 'soft landing' or is catastrophe inevitable? To argue that the existing industrial-growth ethos must be retained, with its inordinate demands on the natural world and on society, is to argue for a crash.

*Tony Beamish joined the Liberal Party in 1975 hoping, as a committed Green, that it would become the main vehicle for change in the economic thinking of the UK. In 1977 he co-founded the Liberal Ecology Group (now the Green Liberal Democrats). In 1979 he helped to get the famous Margate motion on conventional economic growth passed. He has written several short papers on ecological economics, and the booklet No Free Lunch.*

*Notes:*

- 1 J. S. Mill, *Principles of Economics*, Bk IV, chap. VI.
- 2 J. Ruskin, 'Letters on Political Economy': *The Arrows of the Chase*, Vol. 2.
- 3 Lecture given at University College Dublin, April 1933 – my italics.
- 4 See Ian Bradley's book, *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal Britain*, p. 142.

## Research in Progress

*This column aims to assist research projects in progress. If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other helpful information – or if you know anyone who can – please pass on details to them. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to the Editor at the address on page 2.*

**The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s.** *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

**Defections of northeast Liberals to the Conservatives, c.1906–1914.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

**The grassroots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;** the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, First Floor Flat, 16 Oldfields Circus, Northolt, Middlesex UB5 4RR.*

**The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing

election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

**The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.** Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*

**The Liberal Party 1945–56.** Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*

**The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.** Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s, and also the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Cheltenham Avenue, Twickenham TW1 3HD.*