

Green politics in Britain is nothing like the force it is in West Germany. But it is on the rise. Sellafield, acid rain, Greenham and nuclear dumping could be straws in the wind.

Britain's Growing Greens

Interview with Jonathon Porritt

Jonathon Porritt is co-chairperson of the Ecology Party's Political Committee. Here he is interviewed by Bob Dent.

The Ecology Party manifesto at the last election said 'green politics is the single most significant international movement since the birth of socialism at the end of the 19th century.' What aspects of socialism do you see green politics incorporating and what aspects do you see it rejecting or going beyond?

The first important 'socialist' element of green politics is a redistributive emphasis. What is clear is that you are not going to get an ecological society without a very radical redistribution of wealth, of land and of the means of production. We are asking people to be dependent on a different set of values and a different interpretation of wealth, and not to be dependent upon so-called affluence. You could not possibly make that demand or request in a society as grotesquely inegalitarian as ours. And therefore, even to begin to contemplate moving towards a green political future, we have got to talk more radically about the redistribution of wealth. The second thing is the recognition of the way in which power operates in society and the extent to which groups of people are quite literally disenfranchised, or disempowered, and not able to play any part in society. So again, the emphasis from the Left on correcting the balance in terms of influence in society is crucial.

The things from the Left, or from certain wings of the Left, which we would find incompatible are the following. Firstly, the emphasis on reindustrialisation, which to us is an anachronistic response. Understandable, but anachronistic because it's failed really to confront some of the changes which have taken place in the world economy. Secondly the emphasis on centralisation which is of paramount importance to traditional socialism. And lastly the emphasis on the state which is, I suppose, a reflection of the centralisation theme in a particular form.

My own personal points of familiarity and very close connection with the Left come from the early libertarian traditions, William Morris and so on, and from the anarchist traditions of left politics. I think that form of decentralised socialism is something that has had a pretty rough time in socialist politics during the course of this century.

Of the three points of difference — reindustrialisation, centralisation and statism — the last two are ones which sections of the Left have, at times, dealt with quite critically. But the first one, the question of reindustrialisation and growth, distinguishes the Ecology Party, and green politics generally, quite sharply from the Left.

This really is the key. It's not growth itself, however, that we are opposed to. It's the concept of an economy that attempts to meet

people's needs by ever-increasing production and consumption. We are historically at a complicated time. If you look back, it is quite evident that people's welfare has benefited from this economic approach. No ecologist is going to sit here and say it hasn't served the needs and interests of people in the past. But as soon as you begin a real costing of what we are now getting out of that type of economic approach, you come to a much more undecided area, where the benefits may well be exceeded by the costs of pursuing that type of future.

Firstly there is the problem of new technology. It is apparent that the relationship between productivity and employment has broken down. In the past you could reasonably expect that if you increased your productivity, then employment would follow along behind it in a more-or-less predictable pattern. This is not going to happen in the future. You can now envisage a growth economy which is creating no work at all.

Secondly there is the ecological aspect. If you look at that type of growth and the impact it will have on our biological systems, which are the key to our wealth, it is evident that they cannot be sustained indefinitely into the future. Ecologists don't talk any longer about oil running out or this and that mineral becoming extinct by such and such a time. But if you look at the net demand we are making on the planet and project the needs of people over the course of time against what the planet can meet, it's evident that at some

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stage in the future we are going to come to the end of the present consumption of finite resources. Either we cause the end ourselves, or it happens through some means which will be extremely unpleasant to live through.

Thirdly, and this is a very difficult area, there's the question of whether the pursuit of social well-being through economic goals is actually benefiting people. Clearly one is on very vulnerable ground, and it is very difficult to talk about things like this when there are still people living below the poverty line. But if we emphasise the element of wealth as the be-all and end-all of targets, of goals, of things towards which we should be aiming, we are impoverishing people in a very different, subtle, way. It's a very simple thing, but if you encourage people's instincts of greed, envy, competition and materialism, the basis of your society is bit by bit very insidiously being corrupted.

Could you say more about how you see unemployment?

This is an intriguing area. It's astonishing how a Tory government could be re-elected on the basis of what they have done, given the

level of unemployment and their refusal to make promises about reducing it. Now polls suggest that although people put unemployment at the top of their list of concerns, they do not believe what the major parties are telling them is going to happen. Where does that cynicism, or scepticism come from? People are, I believe, wiser than the people who claim to represent them. Now, maybe I'm just saying that to persuade myself because it is part of the Ecology Party's platform that full employment is a thing of the past in the sense that we will never return to the days of full employment as measured by each person having a job for a certain number of hours a week at a fixed rate for a fixed employer.

So what's the alternative?

The alternative lies in getting away from our present type of economy. But firstly it has to be said that the formal economy, the large-scale old-fashioned economy, is still immensely important. We don't do ourselves a service by laying so much emphasis on the alternatives. People think we want to run all that down. Clearly, that formal economy is going to be the backbone of our employment creation for at least the next decade. There's no question about that. But there must also be no doubt that during that time both technological pressures and pressures from newly-industrialised countries will ensure that millions of jobs will be lost in that sector of the economy. So although we acknowledge that it's important, we have got to shift the emphasis elsewhere. We would shift it in three ways.

Firstly, instead of generating our wealth by attacking the earth and using it for our own so-called benefit, we should create wealth and employment by living in harmony with the planet. For example, by putting a huge emphasis and great prestige on creating energy by nuclear power, we feel we are doing something against the interests of the earth. And in my case, simply from the employment aspect alone, it would be more sensible to adopt an alternative energy strategy. Secondly we must become more self-reliant as an economy. It's complicated, and we acknowledge the difficulties, but this is an important aspect of ecological principles as well as an important part of getting the economy back on a sounder basis. We would introduce import substitution schemes and tariff barriers as soon as possible so that our obsession with world trade as a means of generating wealth would be turned on its

head. We would generate wealth by creating things for ourselves in our own communities.

The third area is that of structural change. It's obvious that as work declines in the formal sector of the economy, you've got to give more people access to that work. You can't have what will become this increasingly small elite of people with highly paid jobs, in often highly intensive export-oriented industries, with the mass of people on the periphery. That's the direction we are going in with new technology at the moment. You could actually have a society where the minority of people are employed and the rest are on the edges. Mike Cooley and various others have talked about this. Some people in our capitalist system are dead keen to be moving towards this, and that's why technology is being used in the way it is being used today.

I can imagine many socialists thinking this is all very well, but what you are faced with is the question of the control of resources and power in society. What do you do about that?

OK, the things we want to achieve will be opposed, violently at certain levels, by people who have a vested interest in the way the economy runs at present. But how do you oppose those forces in society? Now the conventional answer from the Left has always been that you have to mobilise a mass in order to generate a power block which is as strong as the group from whom you are trying to take power. And so the emphasis is on 'the working class', regardless of whether that as an entity is still valid in Britain. The emphasis is on mobilising a specific segment of society in order to take power from another segment of society. The trade unions will be part of that particular movement. Now in many respects the trade unions are an extension and reflection of the problem, as is a class analysis of politics. By endlessly emphasising these differences you simply guarantee an element of continuity in the war between different sections of society which results in a stalemate. What we are talking about is, I suppose, a much more anarchistic approach to the idea of divesting power blocs of the power they have. Clearly that can sound either very woolly, or rather irrelevant for the times in which we live. After all, those people who have the power are, if anything, tightening their hold and are ensuring that it will be harder to get that power away from them in the future.



The AGR at Sellafield

But the class argument is that firstly, economic resources are in the hands of a few and need to be socialised, and secondly the working class is that section of people in society who produce the wealth at the point of production and they are the people who, if they act together, can actually socialise production. They have the economic power because they provide the labour. There is an actual conflict of interests between the capitalists as a class and workers as a class.

You don't have to turn this into a class analysis of politics. What you can turn it into is an analysis of politics in terms of people who do have power and access to wealth and those who don't. It's inappropriate to talk about that division exclusively in class terms. There are all sorts of people on both sides of that divide who you could not explain or interpret within a class analysis. I'm not trying to get out of this. I want to confront it because green politics, in my mind, has always been too 'soft'. It has allowed people to think it doesn't need to take a confrontational stance. It's allowed people to see it as something very nice and gentle. That's part of our politics. But we have got to identify far more closely with people who are on the side of the divide where they are excluded from power and from wealth, and we have to identify the enemies on the other side of the divide. I would say that quite emphatically.

Could you say something more about the redistribution of wealth?

The means by which the conventional Left want to redistribute wealth presents a major problem for us. They are still talking about a lot of nationalisation and major planning controls. Now to us that isn't going to work. We favour a more decentralised economy, with local savings banks and the various types of input that you can make with regional enterprise boards. The GLC provides a very interesting example of how this can be achieved at a local level, whereas by definition, you cannot do that at national level. If you look at the concept of local production for local needs in a co-operatively based society, which in a nutshell is what an 'eco' economy would be like, then you can talk about a genuine redistribution of wealth. If you do it on a national level, with huge schemes and massive plans, then people will just not get a look in.

Then there is the idea of global redistribution. There is no way that the Third World is going to be able to adopt our pattern of industrialisation. Are we callously going to carry on saying, 'OK you will forever rot in that state of neglect'? Or are we actually going to find ways of narrowing the gap, not through Brandt-type proposals, which are clearly in the interests of the West, but in ways which will benefit the Third World. Finally there is the redistribution of wealth across generations. If you redistribute the wealth today at the expense of generations to come how closely is one abiding by one's socialist principles? We would take on board the idea of responsibility for future generations to come. Although it is harder to pin down, it is just as much part of one's commitment to human values as responsibility for people alive on the planet now.

The division between the Right and the Left in some senses could be characterised as a debate between public and private, the collective versus the individual. Where does green politics stand in that divide? Do you think it is a fundamental one?

Basically we are asking people to acknowledge a different political contract whereby the levels which previously have been seen as opposite, namely all the emphasis on the individual or all the emphasis on the collective, can be viewed from a different angle. What we are trying to do is squeeze out of the area of politics the

national entity, the central entity. The two bits we would like to get back into focus are the community level, in which to talk about the individual has meaning, and at the other end the international level. The nationalistic emphasis in the middle is really what confuses a lot of the debate. If you think of politics in terms of both global responsibility and individual rights, human rights, then collectivism and individualism have to be brought together.

Why do you favour a separate Ecology Party rather than being a general pressure group or perhaps working in other parties, like the Socialist Environment and Resources Association in the Labour Party?

Certainly given the political system in this country you have got to be pretty demented to set up a political party. Minority politics is nobody's idea of fun! I can assure you we wouldn't go on doing it unless everyone was convinced of the need for a separate party.

There is no way that the Third World is going to be able to adopt our pattern of industrialisation

The green position can be taken on board in bits and pieces by other parties but the unique expression of it as a holistic viewpoint is something that is so radically different from what any other party is saying in this country that you've got to be able to offer the whole thing to people. You can't just offer bits of it and say these are the green trappings on other people's philosophies.

We have no false claims about the success of the party. Obviously we got a very disappointing vote in the last general election. There were some good things in terms of sympathy and changing ideas but in terms of votes it was very frustrating. But if you look at other areas of green politics in this country you don't get a very different impression. For instance, SERA has been battling away within the labour movement to try to change their ideas for a long long time. I think the more honest ones in SERA would acknowledge that they have had as little success as we have. They haven't even persuaded the Labour Party to end their commitment to nuclear energy.

So what kind of strategy do you envisage for the future? What kind of constituency or base do you see for green politics in this country?

I suspect you ought to say power base really because that's what it comes down to. If you haven't got a power base and if you are not able to stake a claim to power in society you will never be taken seriously. That is a very difficult thing for a lot of ecologists to come to terms with because we are opposed to the exercise of power in society as a means of exploitation and intimidation. To be forced to go too far down the road of power politics in order to be effective would be utterly abhorrent to many of us.

But having said that, there's not much point in being a political party unless you are going to accept a power analysis of society. Now I have great reservations at the moment about whether we have a power base. I think the green movement is largely fictional as an entity in this society. It exists in such a broad range of feelings and strands of thought. Some bits of it are extremely reactionary. If you include certain environmental organisations as part of the green movement then you are tapping deep into that conservative, reactionary heartland of England. Then you go right to the other extreme with groups who may be becoming greener but whose essential focus is still not green. A lot of the peace movement is in

that position. So the 'green movement' as an entity, as a power base is a problem.

I very much hope that the green movement will grow as it has grown in Germany. I believe we have got a new role to play. It is an ambitious one, and given our performance in the election it may be one we are incapable of fulfilling. We must become part of a new form of opposition to the kind of government we have now. The only way in which one can foresee what is going to happen in the next four or five years is that things will get increasingly difficult. Quite evidently unemployment will not go down. That's for sure. Things will get a lot worse. What are the alternatives that are going to be offered? Although they may make some changes, the major oppositional parties will not change their growth-orientated response which they have been using. To us, therefore, they will be offering a very limited form of opposition, a mirror-image type of opposition, with many different human angles to it, but essentially the same kind of thing. Our job will be to draw together the strands of a new type of oppositional force.

There are a variety of people within different traditions — socialists inside and outside the Labour Party, feminists, peace activists etc — who regard green politics with a great deal of sympathy. Are you hoping these people will look to the Ecology Party as an umbrella organisation, or do you envisage other organisational alliances springing up of which the Ecology Party will be a part?

In all humility I think it will have to be the latter. The idea of the Ecology Party becoming an umbrella organisation is beyond us. I just don't see that we are the organisation that can do that, that can fulfill that role. What I do think is that we will be a very important part of what I hope will be this new growing oppositional force in society.

I would like to think that this oppositional politics will incorporate involvement in elections, will incorporate what we call eco-action, which is direct involvement in all levels of society in actually practising the things which we preach, and it will incorporate non-violent direct action as a very important contribution to our commitment. There will be clashes between people who say that direct action and electoral action are contradictory, and all the rest of it. It will be an alliance that will be incredibly hard to bring together because many people will come in from so many different angles. But unless one can think of building that sort of broader alliance of interests, then I think it is an exceptionally gloomy outlook. As I said before, ecologists have stopped going on about resources running out. What really worries them is that time is running out. •

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