

Look back over this year and the round luminous eyes of a dying seal will stare back. Did we do that, killing them slowly with our waste? The fear that we did helped propel 15,000 new members into Friends Of The Earth (FoE) this year, bringing them to their highest membership so far of 65,000. That makes them the organisation of 1988. Next to their shiny green door in east London is CND, whose membership fell by rather more. Does Jonathon Porritt, director of FoE and one-time co-chair of the Green Party, ever fear that a tide of floating anxiety washes in and out of activist organisations restlessly seeking the think that will make the world a better place? He groans. Yes, 'very, very strongly'.

1988 was the best and worst of years for environmental groups. It was a year of breakthrough, when, after years of popular disquiet, every political leader and every newspaper stated that the environment was at the forefront of public life. Indeed, 'the environment' was discovered lurking in every public issue from the skies above through privatisation to the simple boiled egg. Once-disparate concerns merged into a single language and vastly different pressure groups appeared to speak the same voice. By the end of the year, the environment had emerged as the dominant discourse of public life.

And in part that breakthrough was because of the worst; retribution, so it seemed, had finally arrived. The chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) of modern living were destroying the skies above our heads (Ozone Trends Panel report, March); the rains were destroying the lakes and forests (a delegation from northern Europe to the House of Commons criticises the UK's lack of policy, February); the seas were so polluted that seals began to die in their thousands (April); below the ozone layer the air was heating up, like a greenhouse. Perhaps human intervention in nature had already stirred

Engaging Greens

1988 will be coloured green in the history books. Sarah Benton talks to Friends Of The Earth director, Jonathon Porritt, and puts the environmental year in context

the great floods that washed through Bangladesh, the hurricane that devastated Jamaica in the autumn. And a pariah ship called the Karin B circled Europe seeking to dump a cargo of waste that would poison the land.

In 1988, disaster after disaster seemed to assault the world and, at last, political consciousness. But nature had a helper: Nicholas Ridley, the man responsible for the environment - to us for the environment. He must curse those long-gone days which brought planning and local government into a single department and, by christening it 'the environment', unwittingly landed the state of the world on his desk. Through such an anachronism, he unites all green groups in hatred.

He is the man, reported Joe Rogaly in the *Financial Times*, who said it would be cheaper to keep the Norwegians in smoked salmon all their days than clear up acid rain. 'He frankly is not concerned about or interested in what the environmental issues are' says Jonathon Porritt. And: 'He actively dislikes most of the people engaged in promoting environmental awareness in Britain'. Not just the radical end, like FoE or Greenpeace, but the respectable conservatives of country conservationism too. He had condemned them for selfish 'nimbyism' (the 'not in my back yard' acronym), before it was revealed that he himself had opposed building at the end of his garden. Questioned in December on the political impact of the Green Party he affected to believe that no Green Party exists in Britain. His indiscriminating scorn made 1988 a year of unusual common cause among environmental organisations. He is, concedes

Porritt, good recruiting sergeant for the green movement'.

And so is Mrs Thatcher, but not for the same reason. 1988 - September 27 to be precise - was the year when Mrs T came out as green. It is this, Porritt says, which will make 1989 different. 'Make no pretence about this, Mrs Thatcher has done as much for raising the profile of environmental issues in 1988 as any other politician in this country. That may be an uncomfortable truth for people to live with, but the fact is that in one or two speeches she outpaced her political opponents on environmental issues and came across to the British public as if she was taking the lead on this issue. Now *that*', he concluded sombrely 'is the extent to which the opposition have failed over the last four or five years to make any serious impact on those issues'.

It could have been different. The environment was an issue waiting to happen, especially in Britain. Not because hazards are worse here, but because the political system is peculiarly immune to significant shifts in popular feeling. Ironically, the shift has been especially strong among Labour's target voters - women in the south east of England. Labour didn't listen. Jonathon Porritt has no sympathy as they now scramble in the prime minister's wake. Or rather, he has considerable sympathy for some of Labour's politicians, but not Labour's failure of leadership. At the time of the 1987 election, he says, 'All the opposition parties were very active indeed in developing a better policy position. In the Labour Party people like David Clark [then environmental spokesper-

son] and the committee set up to revise Labour's environmental policy..., all these people were doing fantastic work. But they were then in my opinion terribly badly let down by the leadership who decided that the environment was not an issue to campaign on, that it was still the preserve of the muesli-munching middle classes and therefore barely relevant - even to a Labour Party that's trying to make itself more relevant to today. They didn't campaign on it, in the election or afterwards.'

Today's 'real opposition' comes not from parties but from the voluntary and pressure groups, suggests Porritt. So what did the environmental movement do in 1988 to change political awareness? He cites some of FoE's campaigns this year, most notably on the ozone hole and the use of CFCs and on preventing Karin B dumping its waste here. For the first campaign they threatened a consumer boycott, for the second, they generated publicity. A newly sympathetic media responded.

If 1988 marked a change in what public policy should be about, it also offered new tactics and new possibilities to the individual for demonstrating public concern. For the first time in Britain, the consumer boycott emerged as a national political weapon during September's 'green consumer week'. Up till now, only Anti-Apartheid has used the tactic, with some notable, but very patchy, successes. This year the *Daily Mail* ran a consumer-based campaign on lead-free petrol, after noting reader response to their campaign on the dying seals. Towards the end of this year, the *Daily Mirror* began a campaign against testing cosmetics on animals, featuring angry Avon ladies with the same ease as they had once presented angry nurses. Politically-conscious consumption is a trend for the future.

So far, no damaging splits inside the environmental movement have emerged in public. But the British green



Jonathon Porritt: Not seeking the wholesale transformation of society

movement is largely made up of 'professional' groups, like FoE, with no voting membership. Greenpeace is positively autocratic. This does relieve the groups of sectarian competition: as Porritt says, Ridley may increase FoE's numbers, but their aim is to change the environment, not swell their own importance. The fact that they are professional pressure groups minimises internal conflict. FoE's political membership breaks down like this: 25% Labour, 25% Democrat, 20% Green, 15% Conservative, the rest non-party. 'A non-party pressure group lives and dies by its ability to represent a

wide spectrum of opinion', says Porritt. FoE has to narrow its framework to sustain its status. Perhaps this too is a sign of the times: disillusion with participatory and representative decision-making, a will for a different relationship between supporters and leaders; a desire for effect, not for democracy.

Nonetheless, at least the fundamental conflicts lurk. First there is the clash between urban and rural needs, sometimes masking a class fear of the urban poor spilling out into a sanitised countryside. The green belt becomes a cordon sanitaire locking the poor, blacks, the

unemployed, into the crumbling cities. The inmates have often had deaf ears for this middle-class voice of environmentalism. But as deregulation, privatisation and cutbacks in public spending have hit the cities, FoE over the last year has been running a Cities For People campaign, focusing on transport, green spaces and housing. Here, their role has been as facilitator, bringing together local groups to make common cause. Government policy on planning and privatisation has channelled much of urban anxiety into environmental form.

There were few signs in 1988 that the second, looming

conflict can be amicably resolved. As Kent prepares its case against the particulars of the Channel Tunnel, it does not question the general case for 'growth'. FoE is not against growth, as such. But it wants a 'sustainable' economy, and the 'international economic order' is most definitely not a sustainable economy. A refusal to question that economic order leads straight back to 'nimbyism' and the polarisation of class, city, rural interests.

This is not FoE's problem. 'It is not seeking the wholesale transformation of society, which is what the Green Party is trying to do'. But even within their narrow remit, 'environmental issues do stick several spokes in the ideological wheel of what you might consider Thatcherism to be' says Porritt. Growth at all costs, a rhetoric (and practice) of deregulation are incompatible with environmental criteria (as is, he says, 'crude labourism'). Somehow, the future has to bring a public accounting of those worldwide costs of unrestrained, unequal growth.

1988 was not the year in which these recognitions had to be made. As such, the year may have been a turning point for the public treatment of the environment, making it the dominant perspective on public issues, but it has brought the movement only to the edge of a turning point. Porritt is aware that it could polarise, that it has not yet faced up to the implications for the poor in cities and the Third World. But he has seen signs in 1988 that defending one's own patch leads people to inquire more deeply into the cause of the threat. He cites the local groups which formed to oppose nuclear waste dumping; they did look up from their own back yard to examine the nuclear industry more generally. He finds his optimism on this: if local concern develops outwards into general concern, if concern for human beings can be uncovered in the cosmic anxiety about 'non-human' destruction, then those trends might be the humane pattern of the future. •