

# New Times Green Times

Thatcherism may command the political agenda of New Times, but the greens command its moral agenda. **Fred Steward** discusses why the green outlook is so in tune with the times

**I**n the present period of new-right ascendancy, one of the most positive and encouraging developments is the emergence of green politics as the focus for a creative and engaging opposition. This success has been achieved by a diverse movement with little formal political power yet a compelling capacity to influence the political agenda. In Britain it remains unrepresented at parliamentary level yet the prime minister feels obliged to treat it with respect rather than contempt. In Brazil local landowners feel confident enough to kill a union organiser and rainforest champion yet internationally politicians compete to express their outrage. Why does green politics have such a purchase while its status appears so precarious in terms of established political and economic power? What is it that the greens express which makes them in tune with those same new times in which the Right has flourished and the Left has foundered?

The green outlook has many facets which reflect different features of the changing economic and cultural context. The new times are said to offer new opportunities for social diversity and individual choice. Some dimensions of green politics do indeed express aspects of change in which issues of individuality, diversity and choice figure very strongly.

Personal responsibility for the consequences of one's actions is a prominent theme on matters ranging from recycling newspapers to the purchase of fur coats. Decentralisation of economic power is expressed in relation to self-sufficiency and emphasis on small-scale local enterprise. Choice of new patterns of work and consumption for individual satisfaction and self-realisation are central to the green outlook. These aspects appear to reflect those broader economic and cultural shifts which in general have been appropriated by the Right.

Yet these issues represent only part of the green picture. In addition there is a striking renewal of collectivism, universalism and social purpose. The individual is seen in the context of a global identity, the human species. The ecology of the planet is given a primary status which informs all policy issues. Interdependence and sustainability set the terms for individual and social choice. The future of the planet is a fate shared by all and hence is the overriding focus for common purpose and action. The rise of green politics, therefore, also represents a pattern of change in which collective identity and universal values assume a new status and significance.

These two contrasting dimensions are both of fundamental importance to an understanding of current processes of change and an assessment of new political potentialities. Analysis must embrace the dynamic of their inter-relationship, not privilege one over the

other.

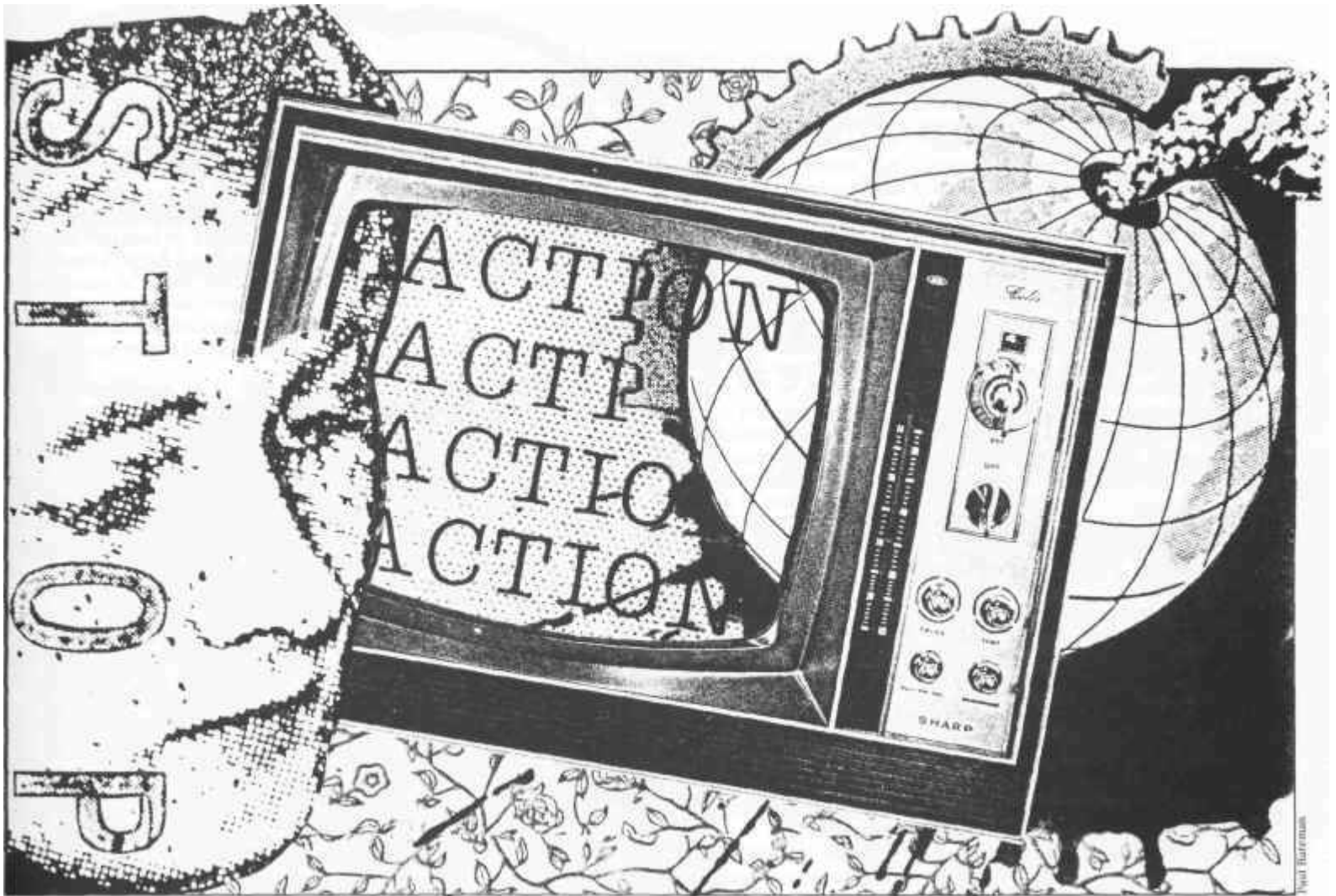
Individuality and choice cannot be dismissed as peripheral to a new social purpose. Universal moral aspirations cannot be consigned to the conformist dustbin of bureaucratic industrialism. The reality is that both of these elements are present in the new context and the Left has been outflanked by political currents engaging with both. The Right has captured the terrain of economic modernisation and consumer choice. The greens now hold the high ground of moral vision and all-embracing social transformation.

The political options for the Left are neither a 'realism' based on accommodation with a selfish individualism on a new 'fundamentalism' reinstating benevolent centralism. Instead we need to combine the collective and the individual, common purpose and personal choice, in a new way. The greens offer some valuable insights into the possibilities.

**At the heart of green concerns is the threat of environmental destruction.** Implicit in this concern is the suggestion of a qualitative leap in the impact of industrial development, expanded consumption and technological change. Does this perception signify a new epoch in the environmental impact of the economy and technology? Most schemes for periodising industrial change concentrate on work and the production process rather than on its environmental effects. Environmental impact in itself is hardly new. Economic change throughout history has had such effects.

The rise of mass production carried with it a range of substantial and negative environmental effects. Air pollution from smoke, river pollution from toxic effluent, exhaustion of mineral and energy resources, despoilation of landscape through overexploitation, all took their toll. Such destructive consequences were gross and manifest yet in general were limited geographically and over time. Effects were usually confined within national boundaries and were evident within a short space of time. Causality was direct and immediate.

The postwar period has been marked by two striking developments concerning geography and time. The globalisation of industry and technology has dramatically increased our capacity for affecting the planetary biosphere. This is a consequence both of the scale of production and consumption and the speed of diffusion of technology into the world market. Product innovations ranging from motor cars to aerosol cans have global repercussions. In addition, new technologies like nuclear power embody features which transcend national boundaries in the event of catastrophe. Human capacity to affect the planetary environment appears to have reached a new level.



Accompanying this has often been an increased difficulty in ascertaining the relationship between cause and effect. Consequences are expressed way beyond both the workers in the industry and the direct consumers of its products. A local event like a nuclear plant melt-down has an impact across the world through the radiation released. Individual consumption decisions on the use of aerosols containing chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) can affect planet-wide systems such as the ozone layer. Environmental impacts become increasingly cumulative and indirect. They are expressed over new and unpredictable time spans. Actions which in the past appeared sustainable - for example the use of the oceans as a source of food or a destiny for waste - may rapidly precipitate critical thresholds for the survival of species like seals and whales. Events in the present such as burning fossil fuels and deforestation could have dramatic consequences for future generations through the greenhouse effect. On all of these issues the evidence is contested, yet the potential threat is one of unprecedented enormity.

**T**he new epoch carries with it new problems of handling uncertainty and exercising political power. These have engendered a crisis in the structure of regulation, a characteristic of the earlier order. The rise of mass production was accompanied by social press-

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ure in response to environmental impacts which led to reasonably effective regulations. This occurred through the political and legal channels of the nation-state. The clean air acts got rid of the London smogs, planning legislation controlled the balance between town and country. Such national legislation was accompanied by the growth of administrative structures in which rationality and expertise were deemed the province of the professional, and social interests were confined to indirect representation. It was the era of the expert committee in which consensus was based on detachment and reason. Partisanship and explicit values were seen as introducing emotion and irrationality into a political process that would best succeed without them.

The new features of environmental concern have challenged these established political forms. There are limits to the capacity of national sovereignty to deal with threats to the environment. Priority needs to be given to new supranational forums for the resolution of such issues. Inter-dependence at a global level has to inform the international agenda. The growth of uncertainty and conflict between experts as to the severity of environmental risk has led to a recognition of the limits of rationality alone and an enhanced status for explicit values. There is dissatisfaction with existing structures premised on professional exclusiveness and ex-

pert consensus. Instead there is pressure for an acknowledgement of uncertainty, for explicit representation of diversity in the regulatory process and for a commitment to pre-empting indirect and subtle threats.

The power of green politics is that it has responded to these changed circumstances and articulated a political philosophy and practice in a novel and imaginative way. This has been expressed by the emergence of a new political culture which embraces a notion of individual responsibility along with one of collective strategy. The new green organisations of the 1970s, such as Friends Of The Earth, Greenpeace and the Green Party, embody this culture and have shown a unique capacity to bridge the gulf between transformative politics and the reality of existing political institutions. At the individual level people have shown an ability to radically change their habits and make new choices about personal consumption. The green consumer is no longer an eccentric but a growing and sought-after market segment. Regulatory agencies have been stimulated into action through effective use of established channels of expert evidence and media briefings. The culture is both eclectic and integrative, individualist and collective. Demands are made equally on personal lifestyle, government action and industrial management. Criticisms of bureaucratic rationality are accompanied by skilful

use of expertise and reason in the presentation of arguments which affirm explicit environmental values.

The openness and effectiveness of the political style is clearly underpinned by a clarity of common purpose. It is the combination of these elements which begs analysis. The timeliness of its practice is matched by a resonance for its philosophy. What is it that fosters a receptiveness to a new 'world-outlook' at the same time as reinforcing a commitment to choice and diversity? What ideas and values lie at its root?

**Green thinking draws on a clear moral stance** which is both a radical challenge to the existing order yet in tune with the times. There are two central values to the green outlook and these inform a range of green social and economic policies as well as specifically environmental issues. One of the core values is an emphasis on the importance of qualitative as opposed to quantitative objectives as a measure of social progress. The quality of life expressed through health and environment takes precedence over the quantity of material wealth. The wholesomeness of air, food and water are more central than the size of the pay packet. The beauty of the environment overrides the growth in GNP. Job satisfaction and the fulfilment of mixing work and leisure to personal taste are considered more important than restoration of conventional full employment. The other core value concerns the primacy of nature over society. Human goals of all kinds are seen as dependent on the integrity and diversity of the biosphere. As a result a politics concerned solely with the position of different social groups or the relationship between human beings, however radical, is seen as implicitly subordinating nature, the source of life, to a secondary position.

It is these core values which inform a series of alternative policies to the prevailing 'industrialism' of both Right and Left. The bureaucratic, productionist structures of the past are unable to pursue these values. Neither are macro-economic policies confined to quantitative redistribution. 'Socialist modernisation', conceived in terms of conventional economic goals such as increased competitiveness of a national economy, does not address such questions even if it embraces new democratic forms on the path to these goals. The new scope for choice between technological options must be adopted not simply as a better route to the fulfilment of diverse consumer needs but as enabling an environmentally-viable path to be followed. A reassessment is needed of the fundamental objectives of a democratic economy and the adoption of broad strategic goals embodying the principles of quality of life and primacy of nature.

The exercise of choice within such a strategic framework is to be made not by centralised institutions, however benevolent, but through a decentral-

ised economic and political system relying on active individual consent by citizens. Such an approach has often appeared individualistic and Utopian, neglecting the realities of power and of the need for firm central direction. Yet there is little doubt that such views now seem more timely and strike a more serious popular note than before. A decade ago suggestions that wind, wave and sun were serious options for energy policy were ridiculed. Now they receive public money and scientific attention. Concern over food processing and additives was seen for many years as the preserve of the crank. Now consumer pressure has put it at the centre of political attention.

Two factors have contributed to this change. The new information technology makes it possible to combine decentralised activities within a wider, even global, strategy to a degree hitherto inconceivable. The capacity to handle complex information with speed enables an interactive flow between centre and locality, producer and consumer, organisation and individual. It becomes more feasible if such a technical path is chosen to combine central purpose with individual choice. There is also a spread of education and access to knowledge via the mass media and international communications technology. This has opened a global perspective to the individual which was inaccessible to previous generations. The consequences of technological change have therefore been double-edged. Although human power to affect the planet has been unleashed, the capacity for local control of technology and the economy has been enhanced. These factors have combined to make the phrase 'think global, act local' actual rather than rhetorical.

**The local dimension of a politics that embraces the global and the individual** is expressed in a new emphasis on 'community'. This encompasses a desire for a smaller, more human scale of economic organisation and social activity. It also embodies a powerful sense of tradition and the maintenance of links with the past. This identification with cultural continuity has been prominent in the recent debates on the built environment which reflect the urban dimension to green politics. Prince Charles has been an exponent of a desire shared by many environmentalists for a smaller scale to our immediate environment and for the preservation of tradition and identity through building to blend with the past. The arguments surrounding this are often trapped in rigid categories. Classical and modernist architects readily wield the traditional philosophies of conservatism or progress to legitimate their choice. In the tv series *Visions Of Britain*, the classicist rested his case on conservative philosopher Roger Scruton's explanation of why change was a bad thing and the modernist quoted Marx and Freud to show that change

was good. Yet the intent of the emphasis on community and continuity is not to narrow horizons or seek to remain static. Instead intimacy and heritage are seen as legitimate values within a global and dynamic perspective.

'Nature' and 'tradition' are central to the green philosophy and represent a challenge to modernism. Modernism's philosophy rested on the virtues of 'technology' and 'change', both of which were embraced by the Left in its vision of social progress. The epoch of Fordist industrialism was accompanied by the rise of modernism and the Left. The new times are accompanied by a challenge to those values expressed in the rise of the greens. Does such a challenge represent a return to the reactionary or romantic ideals of an even earlier era?

**T**here seems no *a priori* reason why it should be linked to political conservatism.

Choice over future paths of economic and technological change could give greater weight to nature and community without denying the value of human technical endeavour or succumbing to social stasis. The new times are an opportunity for the elaboration and assertion of such values in the context of material progress and social and personal liberation.

It is a synthesis of a new type that is required. Not simply modifications confined within the framework of modernism. The modernist categories of technology and change have indeed altered. 'Technology' has shifted from process to product, standardisation to differentiation, production to consumption. 'Change' has been transformed to accommodate social diversity rather than homogeneity, strategy rather than planning, consumer choice rather than state ownership. But whatever the importance of these insights, in themselves they remain too constrained. They need to be accompanied by a re-evaluation of the fundamental objectives of political change prompted by the values of green politics.

The relationship between the green perspective and that of the Left remains a problematic one. The successful combination of 'greening' and 'modernisation' is a formidable challenge. The socialist and environmental movements come from contrasting trajectories. Yet in terms of political culture there is a strong affinity between the new analysis of the Left and the practice of the greens. Too many on the Left still see the ideals and culture of the greens as a risky departure from the rationality and progress that they hold dear. Yet in reality these new aspirations challenge the one sided interpretation of the older values made by both Right and Left within the industrialist order. The green movement is in advance, not retreat, and shows the opportunities as well as the threats within the times ahead. •

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