

Beatrix Campbell talks to Jonathan Porritt

Green Solo

Jonathan Porritt was Director of Friends Of The Earth

You said last year the Tories had, with the white paper, one last chance to display some good faith towards the green movement. It was terribly disappointing. What do you now think?

I think it became almost impossible for environmental organisations to believe that they were really going to get action out of this government. The whole thrust of the rest of the cabinet, and their principles, were such that any individual was not able to win. That certainly happened to Chris Patten: no question about that, although he will deny it to the hilt.

What could Mrs Thatcher have done, given her political parameters?

Oh, an enormous amount. Within a market based economy, environmental economics becomes a mechanism for assessing the national accounts. We build in costing systems so that the externalities of any production process are properly reflected in the price of the products or services. None of these things are incompatible with conventional economics. The fact that she balked at using any of the market tools at her disposal is the thing that really grates. It was bad politics.

How do you explain Holland? The acceptable face of capitalism, if you like, it has travelled a million miles further on the green road, with a conservative government responsive to the political atmosphere. Why Holland? And what does that tell us about our political culture?

They've had an immersion in green and development issues through their educational system. Second, the environment was genuinely cross-party in Dutch politics. The Green Party is practically non-existent, because at least four of the bigger parties have promoted a green approach. Thirdly, environmental issues hit Dutch people immediately. Global warming is not an abstraction; it's reality. They're on the receiving end of the entire detritus that comes through Europe along the Rhine. They see that every day of their lives. In terms of green literacy, we are still a long way down the European list.

What do you think of our political culture? You've worked in movements, in a party and in lobby politics. What is it about our political system that makes our politics so inert and conservative?

It is often hard for any lobbying organisation to gauge the extent of change,

the softening-up process going on that is rarely acknowledged by those who are being softened up. It's part of the methodology of pressure groups to accept incremental changes as the means by which change happens. I am convinced that that is the only way change happens. But it can be unbelievably frustrating. Unbelievably.

One obvious difference is proportional representation, which transforms the conversation between the margins and the mainstream. But is something else afoot? The Greens did phenomenally well here in the Euro-election, enjoyed a brief ascent, and are now declining. These things erupt from time to time. But why won't our political system accommodate them?

The most interesting factor about the Euro-election was the lack of information that most people had about the Green's policies or processes. I can't remember seeing in any of the serious newspapers a detailed and constructive critique of the Green Party manifesto. I don't see how people can know what the Green Party actually stands for.

But clearly there was a wish.

I think one has to be a tiny bit cynical about that, because the wish was expressed in a context which most people devalue - the European election.

Nonetheless, to put that little mark on the ballot paper is a significant act. But it's always written off as a protest vote. Didn't something dramatic happen that wasn't sustainable?

In voting terms, no. In interest terms, lifestyle-change terms, who knows? It was much more a cry of a movement than a show of support for a party. In fact, a significant chunk were Tory voters. That is part of the reason why the other parties reacted with consternation.

If you look at the actual quality of the political debate about environmental issues prior to 1987, it was just despairing. And I have to say, the opposition parties did not get hold of environmental issues. The Liberal Democrats, because of internal incoherence; the Labour party - it is difficult for it to be an outright enthusiast for many of the same reasons it's been difficult for the Tory government. Any political system premised upon expansion of the productive process as its bedrock is going to find 'sustainability' and the relationship between humankind and the earth very difficult. I do see considerable conceptual shifts in many important individuals, but at heart there is a reluctance to accept that it is this industrial ethos which has to be transformed.

The Labour Party was formed in the industrial ethos...

Absolutely. So something that posits the idea of a new historical development as large as that which gave birth to trade unionism and socialism, is tricky.

What seems tragic about socialism is that it was socialism as industrialisation - Faustian, modernist, 'conquer nature' not 'live with nature'. But that succeeded an earlier socialism. Do you feel any empathy for that former kind?

Yes. Enormous. In terms of my own political development, back in the 70s, the books that I was reading at that time were partly the ecological classics, but also the works of William Morris and others, which opened up social perspectives of ecology that I wasn't getting from anything else. So I feel a sense of sorrow that that understanding of socialism has been so muted and so ineffective.

Has it gone forever?

No, I don't think it has. The most optimistic thing that one can hope will happen is that socialism will actually rediscover that tradition, and regain a truly green part, of the sort which has been there at different times of socialist history. The Liberal Democrats too are beginning to see some of the important implications in their history. Whether that would happen in the Tory Party, I don't know.

You've reaffirmed your card-carrying Green Party membership, but in all truth, the Liberal Democrats would seem to be a more commodious place for you.

For several years there's been speculation that I was joining this political party or that political party. I have always said that a political party is only as important as its ability to convey the ideas and the values that provide meaning to that movement. I am not the kind of person who has developed deep, ingrained loyalty to the vehicle itself. I still believe that the Green Party is doing the best job at the moment in terms of giving voice to the fullness of those ideas. If it didn't, then indeed one might consider whether or not it was worth joining another political party, to be effective.

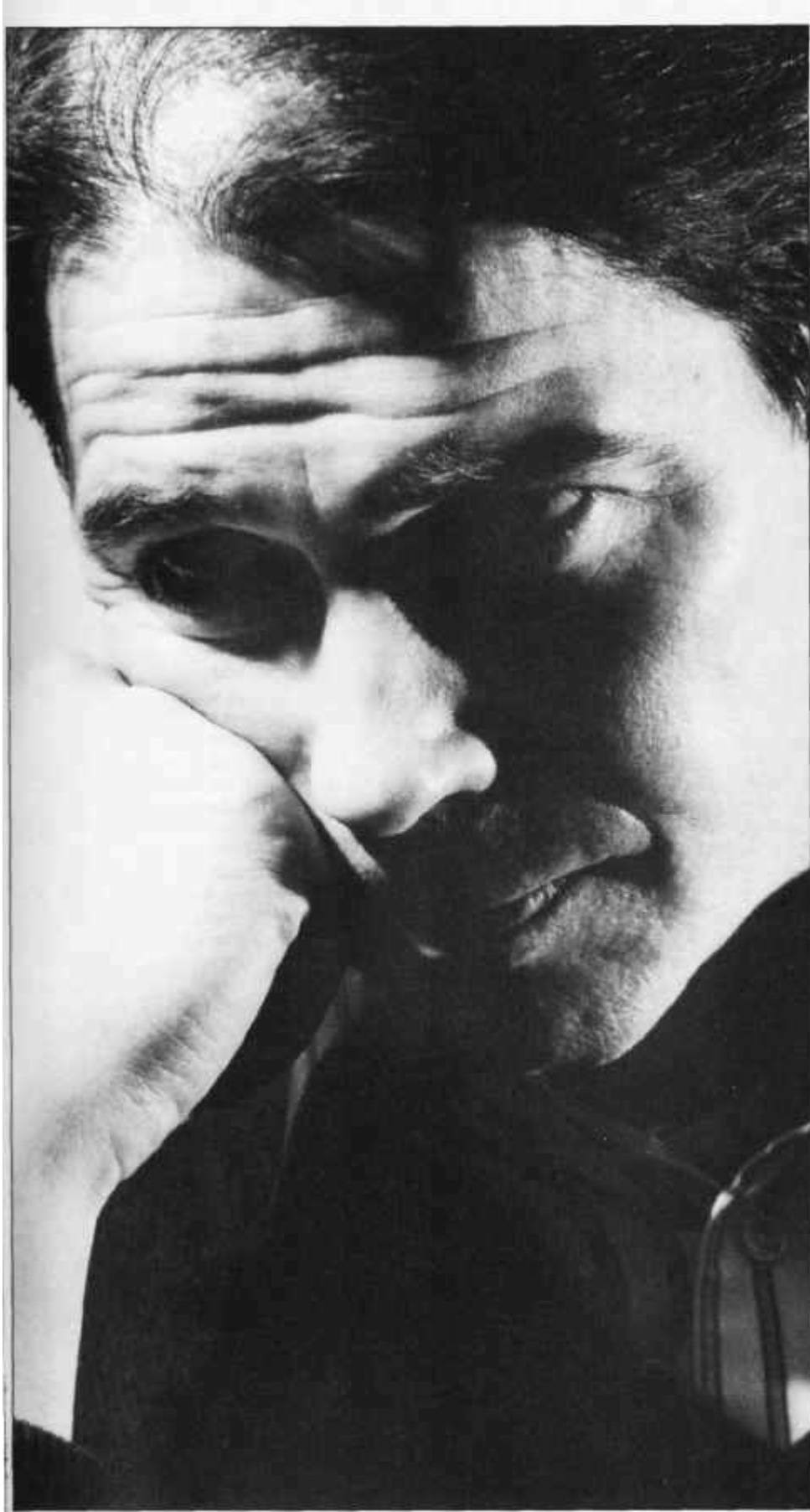
What would 'being effective' be? Being a representative and ultimately an MP?

It might be.

It would be the obvious thing for you to do.

I have a sort of inner resistance to it. At the moment I value the sense of indep-

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endence I have.

But that independence does seem to leave you as a man without a job.

I deliberately chose to do that. I have been in representational roles for a long time. I do see dangers in it: that you become a sort of peripatetic rent-a-quote. Permanently being a solo green freelancer is not likely to be my future. But what organisational role I'll play next I genuinely don't know.

How far does the internal form of the Green Party enable it to operate effectively, given the external world it has to live in? And secondly, how far is its internal form class specific?

The Green Party is going through some pretty standard battles about the nature of democracy in a political party. The first is whether conferences should be representative or individual-based. At the moment any individual who is a member of the Green Party goes to a Green Party conference, but nobody goes along representing groups of people. And the second concern is whether or not the Green Party should acknowledge the role of leadership positions in the party. I don't think I've ever seen the divisions in the Green Party on those issues in class terms. The major division between those two arguments is the extent to which central control is an appropriate route for a party aspiring to greater levels of democracy.

I was thinking more of a certain kind of relationship between the intelligent middle classes and their culture. And some of that you can see expressed in the Green Party, and that's fine. But to extend its social base it has to speak other languages as well.

I don't think there's anything wrong with a middle class orientation in a relatively new political phenomenon. But the question then is, do you stick with that, or do you then look to the ways in which you can magnify your effectiveness?

How are those two key arguments, about the party structure and the relationship to leaders, going to get resolved?

I don't know. And they are fundamental to my future involvement with the party.

You'll leave?

It would be, personally, incredibly painful. The Green Party taught me an immense amount. It was my political home at the time when I was learning what I know about politics. But one moves from those things. You take what you learn with you, and hope that you can gradually build upon it.