

POLITICS FOR A NEW AGE

"A Blueprint for Survival" certainly started something. All around the world new political parties, or politically orientated organisations, are springing up.

The lead was set in June of 1972 by the Values Party of New Zealand. Close on their heels came our own People Party (now the Ecology Party) in Great Britain, quite soon to be followed by the Australia and Tasmania parties. These are all distinct political parties fielding, or intending to field, candidates in elections.

More common are the ecologically orientated pressure groups which have been formed either as independent bodies, or as pressure groups within existing organisations, including political parties. The European Ecological Movement, a synthesis of conservation and environmental activists mainly in France, Germany and Switzerland; dei Kliena Aarde in Holland, Fremtiden I Vare Hander in Norway and SPEC (Scientific Pollution and Environmental Control Society) in Canada, are examples of the former, whilst SERA (the Socialist Environment and Resources Association) is an example of a pressure group set up within an existing political structure (the Labour party) to influence its leadership.

HABITAT, the theme chosen for the United Nations Conference on Human

Settlements to be staged in Vancouver in 1976, chooses five sub-themes which can be directly related to Blueprint; and even that supposed bastion of business enterprise JCI (Junior Chamber of Commerce International) is centring upon ecology and the environment for its main choice of programmes.

Wider Awareness

These are but the tip of the iceberg. Three years ago, when the Ecology Party (People) was being formed, "ecology" was something only discussed between consenting adults in the privacy of their own homes. Now the media, god bless 'em, have brought the word into almost fashionable usage. Unfortunately "Joe Public" still regards it as the high-brow pursuit of an intellectual elite. However, s/he does understand, and show great concern for, preserving the balance of nature. Today one can hold a fairly intelligent conversation with almost anyone, anywhere on at least one or two of the aspects with which we, in the ecological movement, are concerned. Even if the response is somewhat vague, apathetic, or displays a feeling of hopeless helplessness, at least the issues are starting to be discussed.

From the oldies of C.P.R.E., the Conservation Society, and the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council, to the newcomers which include Transport 2000, the Schools Eco-Action Group and the New World Movement, there are now over 150 separate national organisations

within Britain alone whose interests are clearly ecologically orientated.

NEW VALUES capture New Zealand's imagination

Non-existent before June 1972, and unknown to most New Zealanders and television programmes five weeks before the general election of that year, the Values party collected 2% of the votes. That figure may appear inconsiderable but in fact support was much greater because the average was taken over 87 electorates while the Party contested only 42 of them. It also ignores the high percentage achieved in some constituencies, for example in Karori, which achieved a surprising 9%. It also fails to indicate the very wide measure of support the Values Party ideas received among pragmatic Labour and National voters who remained true to the faith for fear that a vote for Values might be the straw that didn't break the camel's back.

Why did Values make such an impact? Because, in the words of Mr Marshall's secretaries, it was "The right party, in the right place, at the right time." It welded together a coherent philosophy out of timely ideas that had not previously been politicised and then submitted that philosophy for public approval with a minimum of dishonesty. This was done in a country where both major parties were intellectually barren and where expediency and shallow self-interest

had become the sickening hall marks of government and party politics.

In May 1972 10,000 Jesus People marched down Auckland's Queen Street, to show their concern with the lack of National direction and purpose. It was an unease felt by Christian and Atheist alike.

Social credit, whilst sporting some attractive policies, was still conspicuously a monetary reform party at a time of spreading disgust with National's worship of the almighty dollar.

On the evening of 30th May in the Student Union Hall at Victoria University, the Values Party - consisting of about a dozen people - held its first public meeting with a view to putting up several candidates in the general elections and providing a haven for the politically homeless.

By the end of October the party had announced 9 candidates and was optimistic about fielding the 15 required if it was to qualify for television time. Some harboured doubts about whether they should try to qualify for TV time at all, because this raised the uncomfortable question about how they would use the time on the air.

The manifesto, called "Blueprint for New Zealand; an Alternative Future", began with an inspirational introduction and then followed through with policy outlined in a narrative and easily readable style. Meant to be as much an educational document as a political tract, it won converts hand over fist in the weeks that followed. "That's the sanest thing I ever read", was the comment of one journalist who had worked for the national party. Sir Dove-Myer Robinson, the Mayor of Auckland, wrote a laudatory article on the manifesto and endorsed the party in the same issue of the Sunday News that endorsed the Labour Party. A prominent Women's Liberationist wrote to say the Manifesto was "a magnificent achievement" and would "cause positive repercussions in the areas of our lives."

Gallery, a New Zealand TV programme ran a documentary on the party which seemed to capture its spirit. This had an extraordinary impact across the nation. Twelve minutes exposure on prime television revolutionised the Values Party. Des Monaghan, the producer of Gallery, would probably not find it simple to admit that he "made" a political party, but that is almost what happened.

The programme sent their candidate total tumbling upwards by leaps and bounds from the 16 or 17 scheduled. Within a week the 1,500 glossy covered "Blueprints" had been sold out in Wellington and quickly disappeared in the other centres where

they were sent to.

On November 2nd, when candidate nominations closed, Values had fielded 42 candidates for the 87 member parliament. This enables them to gain extra broadcasting time.

Most of the Values Party candidates were political novices, many of whom had been politically apathetic before Values caught their interest. Many decided to stand because they felt the pressing need to make a personal commitment to policies and ideals they agreed with after a period of disillusionment and desperation with National and Labour. Some stood because they wanted to vote Values but found there was no candidate in their electorate. Their average age was 29 years, the oldest being 65 and the youngest 21 yrs.

Many men and women who stood as "fill in" candidates without any political training or public speaking experience found, to their amazement at joint meetings, that they were performing far better than their opponents and their local members of parliament. A number found hard to believe the incompetence and lack of imaginative thought of the elected representatives with whom they came into contact. It was, at one and the same time, cause for deep depression and exhilaration.

Values are currently fighting a general election in New Zealand,

with things seeming to be going really well for them. Recent opinion polls have given them 5% and 6%, and the support for them seems to be growing. They have a political Influence far above their numbers or resources, and to a large extent are making the running in this campaign. Almost single handed they have swung the attention of the media onto the issues of nuclear power generation, unnecessary electricity consumption, and a large and wasteful multi-national owned aluminium smelter. In addition they have managed to get population stabilisation seriously considered as a political issue and both major parties are now introducing immigration policies.

They have been particularly successful in infiltrating the Universities, journalism, and some of the young people, who work for government departments and are now expecting to get between 5% and 10% of the votes at the forthcoming election, believing their support to be actually larger than this, with many sensitive people being frightened of allowing the "opposition*" into power.

Britain's Larger Lead Times

The Ecology Party was launched in Britain in January 1973. It commenced life as "People" combining with Movement for Survival in February 1974. The name was changed to "The Ecology Party" at the second annual conference in June 1975, at which time a substantially revised manifesto was also adopted. The party put up

9 candidates in the 2 general elections in 1974 and plans to continue contesting parliamentary seats and to enter local politics.

Like the rest of Britain the Party was taken off balance by the election precipitated in February 1974. Preparations were in hand to fight a campaign sometime after the end of October during that year, but were not sufficiently far advanced to take full advantage of this early election. Nevertheless, a very good showing was made with the best election results showing almost 5% of the vote cast. Even more to the point, perhaps, was that various high ranking politicians were directly challenged with ecological issues on their own platforms, e.g. Sir Keith Joseph in Leeds North East.

The problems facing the Ecology Party are somewhat different to those of "Values", not the least being the difference in the total size of the population. Their first step has been to evolve credible policies for a sustainable, ecologically sound way of life. These policies accept the conditions of a sustainable society given in "Blueprint for Survival"; minimum disruption of ecological processes, maximum conservation of materials and energy, a population in which recruitment equals loss, a social system in which the individual can enjoy rather than feel restricted by the first three conditions. Their second aim is to publicise these policies. Their (ultimately) third

aim is to achieve the political power necessary to implement them.

In order to achieve a sustainable society our present way of life has to be changed in many ways. The Ecology Party believes that this is only likely to be done successfully by following a carefully calculated programme of change. Such a programme could be drawn up by any society or group but, because power in any society is held mainly by politicians, it is likely that it will only be carried out when these politicians in power are also ecologically minded.

There are so called ecological groups in many political parties, their aims and their effectiveness is questionable. All these parties need economic growth to support their policies and the Ecology Party believes that it is too much to expect that any of them can adapt their philosophies to a steady state economy, which is needed to meet ecological constraints, without losing completely their present identity and most of their popular support.

The only way that long term change can be brought about is by an independent ecological party which can offer Britain a clear alternative solution to her troubles and which will challenge other politicians in debate and at elections.

The important difference between the Ecology Party and all other

parties is in its attitude towards economic growth. They need economic growth to sustain their policies. The Ecology Party needs a steady state economy to sustain its policies,

The Ecology Party realises that pollution control, long-life durable goods, reduction of waste, recycling and increased home production of food - are vital to our survival as a nation. It realises that a steady state economy would work best in a society composed of small, self-governing, relatively self-sufficient population units; a society in which employees can be co-owners of the firms in which they work, but also one in which small scale self-employed enterprises are encouraged; a society in which land is owned by the community as a whole; a society which places less emphasis on material wealth and more on personal fulfilment and achievement.

The Party consists of groups and individuals from Cornwall to Caithness, each group free to run its own affairs. Collective leadership is exercised by an annually elected National Executive Committee. At present each member must retire for at least one year after three years continuous service.

Funds are raised nationally from subscriptions, donations, the sale of publications and from the pockets of members. The Party has no financial backers and therefore owes allegiance to no man, industry, trade union, or anonymous organisations.

One of its main tasks is to overcome disillusionment with politics. The Conservation Society, Friends of the Earth, Population Countdown, etc., all have similar objectives to the Ecology Party. The Party believes that these aims can be achieved more quickly through the Party than by piecemeal adjustments made to other parties.

Clearly it has its work cut out to show the pressure groups that it is the only political party worthy of their support. It must also persuade the ecology groups in the other parties that they can only make real progress by joining forces with a new political entity. When this has been achieved then the general public still have to be convinced that theirs is the only party which can promise long-lasting economic stability.

A daunting task perhaps, but if the Values Party experience is anything to go by, is one which can be overcome. The hard work, the back-ground slog, the back breaking effort, and the sheer frustration will one day prove worthwhile.

That day may not be until a media breakthrough is achieved, possibly at another general election or, perhaps earlier, by focusing attention upon some immediate and urgent issue of national importance. Whatever and whenever it is, it will only be through this type of untiring selfless effort, that the principles contained

within "Blueprint" stand any chance of becoming reality and emerging as the politics of a new age.

In the words of the Values Party song-

"It's a question of Values my friends

What's immediately easy is often wrong in the end

Our measures of progress have all gone astray

When money and oil are leading the way

And if you're tired of being led by the blind

Then the State that needs changing is the state of your mind".

K. Michael Benfield
1975