



Comments

Britain's ecological party

What is this election about? Does anyone really know? Have either of the major parties worked out a constructive long-term policy? Have either of them told us where we are going, what sort of society they are creating for us? The answer is unfortunately no. They are simply criticising each other over their respective handling of such secondary issues as the Miners' strike or Britain's entry into the Common Market. Both parties intend to go on muddling through on a day-to-day basis dealing with each problem as it occurs, in that way which is most politically expedient, accommodating each new trend, however socially disruptive it might be, rather than making any attempt to reverse it.

All this was possible while Britain was rich and powerful and when political blunders could only lead to problems on a limited scale. This is no longer so. Britain is poor, nearly bankrupt, and its social fabric has been insidiously undermined by 150 years of industrialisation. In addition political and economic activity will soon be carried out on such a mammoth scale that a single wrong decision on the part of a government could have global repercussions, cause areas the size of Britain to become uninhabitable and lead to the deaths of tens of millions of people.

In these unprecedented conditions it is essential that we have the courage to do something we have never done before; that is face reality however unpleasant it might be. We must also be determined to elect to power people who are not the ordinary run-of-the-mill politicians, people who can think beyond political expediency, who do not try to win votes by promising all sorts of petty benefits which they are not in a position to provide, save per-

haps at an intolerable social and ecological cost, and who can move our society along that course most likely to provide our children with a tolerable future—clearly a very different course from that to which we are committed today.

Consider the problems our politicians are concerned with today: the balance of payments, the value of the pound, industrial productivity, the level of exports.

It is assumed without question that these are the important issues, but on what grounds? We are told that these are basic economic priorities. But even if this were so, why should economic considerations be paramount?

The object of economics after all is to ensure the optimum distribution of resources within a society, not torture it out of shape so that it may be capable of absorbing the resources which economists have arbitrarily decreed its inhabitants should consume. Economics, it should be evident to everyone, except perhaps to economists, should be subordinated to social requirements, not the other way around.

At this point one might ask where is economic growth actually taking us. Is it really creating a better world? Technologists, inebriated with their apparent conquest of nature, never tire of describing the technological paradise they are creating for us. But is it really a paradise? Are we sure that we want such a world?

Do we really long to live in skyscrapers half a mile high in cities of a hundred million people? Do we pine for a man-made cement and plastic world in which the brash artefacts of mass society have been effectively substituted for the varied and subtle works of nature, in which everything which does not directly contribute to man's immediate material comforts will have been systematically eliminated—a

world in which we are to be pampered from birth to death by an all pervasive state welfare system which deprives us of all initiative, all responsibility, all risk?

Do we really regard such things as supersonic transports, individual flying-kits, radar devices that plug directly into our brains, cyborgs, or man-machine hybrids and the remaining paraphernalia of a futuristic space-aged society as anything more than the puerile gimmickry of what were once avant-garde comic strips?

Man has undoubtedly suffered from many things during his tenancy of this planet—but never from not possessing a wrist-watch television set or a radar device plugged into his brain, no more than our society at present suffers from not possessing a third airport, a channel tunnel nor a fleet of Concorde.

These may well be very ingenious things. But they are irrelevant. They solve no human problems and can play no part in a strategy of survival.

Besides it is essential that we realise the cost of achieving this technological nightmare. To get the massive supplies of oil at the right price to keep our industry expanding, we shall have to undertake a massive crash programme of oil production in our coastal waters.

We shall be forced to disregard its inevitable repercussions on coastal communities and on the environment. The North Sea is already very seriously polluted, and even if it were shown beyond any shadow of a doubt that these activities would transform it into a lifeless waste, even if it were clearly demonstrated that the villages and towns on the Scottish and Cornish coasts would be transformed into a stretch of squalid urban slums, we would have to persist undaunted in our designs, totally disregarding such minor considerations.

It would mean continually finding

new ways of disposing of the ever greater quantities of some 500,000 different pollutants which the atmosphere, our rivers and the surrounding seas are ever less capable of absorbing. It would mean damming up more estuaries and flooding more valleys to satisfy industry's limitless water requirements. And even if we make these terrible sacrifices we would only assure, at best, a further decade or two of economic growth. This destructive process clearly cannot be sustained indefinitely in a world of finite resources with a finite capacity to absorb human and industrial wastes. In fact, long before the end of this century the impact of our activities on the natural environment would become intolerable. At this point our industrial society would undoubtedly collapse, and the more we commit ourselves to economic growth the more dramatic would be the consequences of that collapse. The only course open to us if we wish to avoid human misery on an unprecedented scale is to reduce the impact of our activities on the natural environment and re-design our economy so that it consumes less resources (which in any case shall not be available to it) generates less pollution and has a less disruptive effect on social systems.

But if we modify our society in this way, how can we combat poverty, unemployment, homelessness, disease, crime, and all the other problems whose solution requires massive expenditure on scientific research, technological development and industrial growth? Are we sure, however, that these problems can really be solved in this way? Immense sums of money have already been spent throughout the world towards this end but what has been the result? These problems are everywhere getting worse. Are we sure that we really understand them, that we have not interpreted them in that way which makes them appear amenable to a technological solution simply because this is the only one our society has to offer, while we refuse to adopt that life-style which would, in fact, provide their only real solution?

The more we examine the situation, the more it is apparent that our society is moving in a totally wrong direction. It may be providing us with all sorts of apparent benefits, but few of us have taken the trouble to examine at what cost. Few realise that economic growth is a process whereby a new organis-

ation of matter, the technosphere or the world of human artefacts, is systematically substituted for the biosphere or the world of living things, and that the one can only expand by diverting resources from the other. As the former expands therefore the latter must inevitably contract. Now the biosphere has been developed over thousands of millions of years, and is of the most incredible subtlety and perfection, while the technosphere is pathetically crude and rudimentary in comparison. Also man is an integral part of the biosphere, not of the technosphere, which means that this substitution is depriving us of our essential biological and social environment. Thus as industrialisation proceeds, all sorts of maladjustments are created as basic biological needs become increasingly difficult to satisfy. In the US it is becoming increasingly difficult for urban dwellers to drink non-polluted water. A recent survey shows that even bottled water contains traces of human sewage, as well as unacceptably high levels of heavy metals. At the same time it is increasingly difficult to obtain unadulterated foods. The average American is said to consume more than 5 lb of chemicals a year, just by eating the normal American diet—which contains more than 3,200 additives, very few of which have been adequately tested.

Man's social needs are also increasingly difficult to satisfy. The family unit cannot survive in an industrial economy in which most of the economic functions normally fulfilled at a family level have been usurped by supermarkets and other vast commercial organisations. Nor can it survive in an economy in which the mother is forced to relinquish essential maternal duties in order to earn money in a job that may take her every day to a place of work often at a great distance from her home. The survival of the community is also very difficult when economic activity is on a scale that renders the community redundant as a unit of economic behaviour, and when people are increasingly made to take up residence outside their community according to the requirements of their work.

The more we look at it the more it is apparent that economic growth is a device for providing us with the superfluous at the cost of the indispensable.

What then do we do? In January

1972 the *Ecologist* published what has now become a famous document: *A Blueprint for Survival*. It attracted a great deal of attention and has since been translated into 16 languages. It has also given rise to political parties in New Zealand, Tasmania and Alsace, and has at last done so in Britain. People is a new party. It has adopted the Blueprint as its basic theoretical statement. It already has 40 active groups throughout the country and in June is organising a convention to which there should be 1,000 participants. At this election it is putting forward at least six candidates who will contest seats at Hornchurch, Liverpool, Leeds, Eye and two at Coventry. At the next election it will field 600 candidates.

People badly needs your help—contact

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References

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See also this issue for:

The Ecology of Unemployment,
Poverty in the Third World and Energy
and Social Disruption.

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