



IF YOU BELIEVE that a proper respect and understanding of the environment and of people's real needs is fundamental to any political structure in the future, then you are faced, at present, with a difficult dilemma. How best can this objective be approached? The means must involve both an effective method of increasing public awareness of the real urgency of the problems, and also a means of putting this understanding into practice politically.

Many concerned people have, consciously or unconsciously, adopted the anarchist approach. They have eschewed conventional politics, and set up alternative projects on their own, making themselves as independent as possible of the existing economic structure. Their attitude to conventional elections can be summed up in the slogan printed and distributed by *Peace News* at the election of October 1974: "Don't vote, it only encourages them."

We have a lot of sympathy with such feelings. We too find the attitudes and aims of the established political groupings barren and corrupt. However, we believe that anarchism cannot stimulate sufficient popular action quickly enough to overturn either the prevailing massive assault on the earth and on human sensibilities, or the deadening apathy that accompanies it.

We strongly encourage all individual initiative that is based in ecological understanding and brings meaning into the lives of those participating. What we don't believe is that example alone is enough—even if the experiences of these examples are publicised by their practitioners. Only the converted and the very inquisitive read the pamphlets and broadsheets of the alternative culture. The great majority of people are conditioned to learning what goes on from television and the 'straight' press. The same people see politics in terms of elections where Labour and Conservatives, with occasional light relief from Liberals, Nationalists and the NF, fight it out, generally via the personalities of their party leaders. Our belief is that this miasma must be penetrated, and the cycle broken, if any real progress is to be made in changing national priorities from endless growth to ecological stability.

Three Approaches

There are essentially three approaches to achieving aims through the electoral system: *pressurising* all political groupings from outside, *penetrating* chosen ones from the inside, and *chopping* the existing parties directly at elections. All three approaches have their merits, and we are not here going to argue for one method against the others, but rather to explain why we have felt it necessary to add a direct alternative at elections to the many groups and individuals working hard already on the first two approaches.

Pressure groups work most effectively with single issues that do not involve the central dogma of the major political parties. Thus abortion law reform (and its reverse), or changes in, say, the gaming laws, can be brought about whichever major party is in power. Certain environmental measures are similarly susceptible to non-party pressure (e.g. some pollution control, saving whales, minor alternative energy projects, nature reserves), but the ecologists' major planks are the cessation of growth, abandonment of technologies likely to cause serious damage to the earth (e.g. nuclear power, chemical agriculture), and decentralisation of power, and these strike at the root of the philosophy that is the mainstay of both of the Conservative and, implicitly, the Labour Party. Ecologically-minded people working within the existing political parties, including the Liberals, are faced with the problem of turning the soul of these parties to whence it sprang: conservative once meant 'tending to conserve'—but tell that to the CBI; the socialist ideal is "from each according to his faculties, to each according to his needs"—but tell that to the T & GWU.

While in no way wishing to discourage the efforts of those working within existing parties, we believe they face a major contradiction, which in the long run *may* result in a fundamental change in their party, but is more likely, given the vested interests in the *status quo*, to end up with their being bought off with half-measures, or their finally giving up the struggle in that direction. What we intend to offer is a credible and honest alternative that will provide at the same time a candidate for whom ecologists can vote without the usual "They're all dreadful, but we'd better vote for X because she's marginally less appalling than the others", and, in a marginal constituency, provide ecologists who prefer working within their parties with greater leverage to alter the direction of those parties. The threat of a lost seat is more likely to spur the ordinary politician to reconsider his or her views (or at least his or her public image) than a minority of the local party members occasionally making a fuss.

Tactical Defeat

As things stand in Oxford it is natural that supporters of the sitting member (or at least, his party) should feel that an ecologist candidate is a threat—the loss of

any seat might precipitate a Conservative government. To those ecologists in the Labour Party with such feelings we would ask the following question: is it in power or in opposition that the Labour Party will move more quickly to ecologically sane policies? We submit that in power the Labour Party can't see the wood for the trees it is chopping down, and that only in opposition will there be any hope of sufficient detachment to grasp the necessity of ecological thinking. In a tricky campaign, a tactical defeat may be valuable: unwanted heads may roll. Better to endure in the short term the disadvantages of a Conservative Government, if the prospect for sanity in the long term is thereby drastically improved.

To ecological activists within the Conservative Party we would like to say that our view of society in which individual responsibility and small-scale enterprise are an essential part is not inimical to the spirit, as opposed to the actual practice, of conservatism. However the conflict between the private interests of the financial backbone of the party, and the good of the public whom it needs for support, makes the prospect of internal change unlikely unless votes are lost to other candidates offering the advantages of conservative ideals without the shadow of multinationals looming behind them. Under its present leadership a Conservative government is likely to be dangerously unecological in its attempts to 'revive' the corpse of growth, and it may prove to be very hard to work within the party without a conflict of conscience.

In recent years the Liberal Party's main function (if not its intent) has been to be a source of policies to be plundered by the ruling party whenever it seems expedient or appropriate. The only important policy not so adopted is proportional representation, for the obvious reason that it would prevent the two large parties from winning a majority of seats on a minority vote. The present trends suggest that the public are looking for new ways of expressing their disenchantment with the ruling parties. Originally (1950s and 60s) the answer was to vote for the Liberals, and now, *faute de mieux*, has slipped back in the direction of square one (apart from those who have turned to the NF). To return to significance the Liberals must have credible *future* policies, not rely on past hopes. Will this happen while the party is still dominated by Lord Byers of Rio Tinto Zinc?

To sum up, we believe there is a very important part to be played by an independent and diverse ecological movement in the shaping of British politics. Not only will this offer the public the possibility of direct representation in Parliament and on councils, but will also, by taking votes, spur ecologically-minded activists in existing parties to persuade those bodies that the only sane future lies in adopting and implementing ecological policies.

Oxford Ecology Movement