



Green Shoots, Rotten Roots by Jonathon Porritt

IT'S HARD NOT TO BE INFECTED by a new found sense of purpose and optimism within the Environment Movement. Membership of most environmental organisations is soaring; inquiries are running at an all time high. The media can't get enough of today's burgeoning greenery, and politicians are embarrassingly anxious to drape themselves in the stuff. Any movement that can legitimately claim to embrace people as dissimilar as Prince Charles and Sting, the editors of the *Daily Mail* and the *New Internationalist*, let alone Mrs Thatcher and the Bishop of Durham, must surely have something going for it!

Yet the deepest fear of those currently riding the crest of this green wave is that we've been here before, in the early seventies. And since nothing came of it then, why should anything come of it now? One green flash in the pan is, after all, much like another. Such world-weary cynics provide a useful antidote to the euphoric enthusiasm of some of the Environment Movement's more recent converts. In a society dominated by the ephemera of fashion, advertising hype, photo opportunities, and thirty-second "sound bytes", a modicum of cynicism is a handy attribute.

There are two main causes for caution. First, the early seventies did indeed witness an astonishing upsurge of interest in the environment. A spate of doom-and-gloom publications such as *The Limits to Growth* and *The Ecologist's Blueprint for Survival* chucked down the gauntlet of sustainability with considerably more panache than latter-day successors like *Our Common Future* and the *World Conservation Strategy*. Fritz Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* even got the economists up out of their well protected dugouts, temporarily trading in their self-imposed sensory deprivation for a few daring encounters with the real world.

But it all fluttered out within a few years. Perversely and paradoxically, the oil shocks of the mid-seventies actually reinforced the unsustainable policies and profligate attitudes of 'advanced' industrial economies. It was felt that if we could survive such an assault from OPEC through welcome improvements in energy efficiency then we could surely survive anything that the environment might chuck at us. With the tedious wisdom of hindsight, it is now clear that the 1972 Stockholm Conference actually marked the end of a period of enhanced environmental awareness, rather than the dawning of a new era of international co-operation.

Second, it is clear that much of today's "greening" is pretty superficial, and that opinion polls indicating the importance people attach to environmental issues need to be read with sackfuls of salt at the ready. For instance, a MORI opinion poll in 1982 indicated that about 75 percent of people wanted to use unleaded petrol in their cars. But by 1989, despite a significant price advantage for unleaded, a mere 5 percent of petrol sales were actually unleaded. Not even the usual combi-

nation of motorists' chronic ignorance, chronic incoherence within the Department of the Environment, and industry's chronic reluctance to associate good environmental practice with good business, can explain away the reluctance of the apparently 'concerned' to take up the unleaded option until very recently.

Caution, if not outright cynicism, about the future of the Environment Movement would therefore seem to be well justified. But as a hardened cynic, and an intractable opponent of phoney green dreams, even I can't help but feel that this time it's different.

For one thing, the scientists are now with us rather than against us. On occasions, they actually seem to be out in front of the activists of the Environment Movement. In the early seventies, the protagonists of the "limits to growth" scenario relied primarily on an inadequately programmed computer model. Politicians had little difficulty dismissing it as sensationalist speculation. Today, there's nothing speculative about the depletion of the ozone layer, the deforestation of the Amazon,

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the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, or the pesticide residues in our water and food. Hard scientific evidence counts for a lot in a hard materialistic world.

More importantly, today's environmental organisations have learned how to articulate this message without precipitating members of the public into a state of instant and total depression. Though the prophets of the early seventies never consciously intended it, their powerful jeremiads left many people feeling powerless or conveniently fatalistic: "What can I do if things are as bad as that?"

Far greater emphasis is now placed on empowering people by providing the information for them to make changes (however small) in their own lives. Hence the fascinating phenomenon of "green consumerism", the revolt against CFC-based aerosols, the uptake of organic produce, and a host of other lifestyle changes. They are all cumulatively significant.

It is the international dimension which encourages the greatest optimism and not just in the West. In Eastern Europe, the political route for Greens is as comprehensively

blocked by oppression as it is for Greens in the UK by the patent absurdity of our electoral system. Nonetheless dozens of pressure groups have sprung up over the past two years, taking the newly minted and astonishingly green words of Mikhail Gorbachev and Edvard Scheverdnadze at their face value.

The Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, is at last beginning to shape the international agenda in a way that neither the Brandt Report nor the World Conservation Strategy managed to do. The United Nations Environment Programme is at last beginning to come into its own, building on the considerable success of the Montreal Protocol to protect the ozone layer. And perhaps most important of all, environmentalism no longer represents a 'neo-imperialist conspiracy' in many developing countries.

In short, the difference between the early seventies and today lies in the Environment Movement's ability to reach more people in a more politically astute way in a more co-operative international context. But before we all imagine that the environmental battle is won, let me draw your attention to one particularly nasty fly in the green ointment: the apparent success of the Environment Movement may be the cause of its own decline, for such back-slapping perception of success is horrendously premature.

We may have started to stem the tide of destruction, with a few useful reforms here and there, but in truth, little is changing deep down. We are still hell-bent on beating up the planet to create our kind of human-made wealth; we still condone untold suffering among two-thirds of humanity; and society's values are still dominated by the kind of crude aggressive materialism that crushes the gentler, more spiritual side of human nature, and profoundly distorts our relationship with the living Earth.

Having got this far, the Environment Movement must therefore address itself to the inherent unsustainability and inequity in our industrial society, and start the job of encouraging a profound transformation of that society rather than settling for a hopelessly compromised accommodation with it. If it doesn't, the next generation may judge us too as just another green flash in the pan. ✎

Jonathon Porritt has been director of Friends of the Earth since 1984, and involved in the Green Movement since 1974. At the same time, he was an active Green Party Member standing as a candidate in local, General and European Elections on seven different occasions. He is the author of Seeing Green, and (together with David Winner) of The Coming of the Greens, which accurately predicted the huge upsurge of interest in green concerns over the last year or so. He is son of a former New Zealand Governor-General, Sir Arthur Porritt.

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