

# The Political Aspects of Environmentalism in the UK

The two main political parties in the UK often seem to have an inconsistent approach towards environmental protection. There are many historic and ideological reasons for this. **Rachel Godfrey** investigates.



*“Amongst the certainties of political opinion on almost every other subject, the apparently perplexing character of many environmental problems - their lack of ‘fit’ with conventional frameworks for thinking about politics - is very marked”.* Michael Jacobs (1999)

Mounting pressures on the natural environment have seen environmental degradation become an increasing concern for governments. Environmental issues are now established as a distinct area of policy, and their consideration as a dimension of existing programmes, the norm. But to a unique degree, environmental challenges, and the reaction they have elicited among politicians have defied predictions along familiar political fault-lines. The ideological grounding across the political spectrum appears to both incline parties toward environmentalism as well as inhibit an affirmative stand on such issues. This dichotomy is the subject of this discussion paper.

Reference to the ‘environment’ as a distinct policy area did not feature in the manifestos of Britain’s political parties until the 1970’s. Conversely, the issues beneath this label have been political issues for centuries longer. In his history of ‘Greening of British Party Politics’ Mike Robinson observes that;

*“whilst the name is novel and the costume may have adapted, in terms of the physical and human environment as an object of political attention, the essential character of concern has been little altered since the 19th century.”*<sup>2</sup>

Environmental issues have been well-argued since the late 19th Century when the Liberal MP James Bryce first started a campaign for public access to the countryside. His initial proposition failed but the argument raged on until finally Clement Attlee and the Labour Party passed an Act of Parliament in 1949 to establish National Parks. It was described at the time by the Minister for Town and Country Planning as “...the most exciting Act of the post-war Parliament.”<sup>3</sup>

## History of the environment in UK politics

While environmental policies today span many sectors and consist of an unprecedented number of delineated sub-categories - transport, waste, energy, conservation, agriculture, air quality – the origins of political attention to environmental issues fell broadly into two categories: public health and sanitation and the amenity movement. Public health and sanitation issues were first brought into the political arena with the Poor Law Commission of 1834 whilst the ‘amenity movement’, concerned with landscape and habitat preservation began with the formation of the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society in 1865. Legislation addressing

grievances relating to the quality of people’s surroundings and their impact on the human condition date followed shortly after, with Torren’s Artisans’ and Labourers’ Dwellings Act of 1868 and the 1875 Improvement Act which tackled visible and pressing public health and sanitation problems.

By the 1970’s and 80’s, developments in environmental science, public awareness and the emergence of the environmental lobby saw an increasingly institutional response to environmental problems and the introduction of administrative provisions to deal with them. The changing attitudes and unpredictable responses of the Conservative and Labour parties toward environmental issues during this period have earned their detailed analysis. Whilst a consensus has judged the response of both parties as relatively ad hoc and erratic, developments nonetheless marked the beginning of an ongoing process of ‘greening’ of political parties, defined by Robinson as “the translation of ideas, attitudes, motivations, symbols and ways of thinking from the constituent cells of the environmental movement to the mainstream political parties in terms of rhetoric, policy and ideology.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1990, the three main political parties issued Environment White Papers in quick succession. The publication of ‘This Common Heritage’ (Conservative), ‘An Earthly Chance’ (Labour) and ‘What Price Our Planet?’ (Liberal Democrats) marked the first concerted political efforts to assess different policy tools for sustainable development and their relative value. The remarkable success of the Green Party in the EU election of 1989 (receiving 15% of the overall vote) and the international profile of environmental issues which accompanied the 1992 Rio Earth Summit saw ‘emphasis on environmental issues’ in the 1992 manifestos of Labour and the Conservative Party peak<sup>5</sup> with 6.6% and 5.8% emphasis respectively, compared with an average of 3.5% for both parties during the 1980s<sup>6</sup>. These encouraging trends were relatively short lived however, followed by a decade during which both parties “tempered their interest in the environment”<sup>7</sup> (‘emphasis’ in the manifestos dropped back to 2.4% and 2.0% in 1997).<sup>8</sup>

Evaluation of Labour’s contribution to the environmental agenda from 1997 until 2010 has produced mixed results. Progress was made in areas including the reduction of emissions via the Climate Change Levy (2001)<sup>9</sup>, improvement of UK’s historically poor ranking among EU countries in recycling and the share of electricity generated from renewable sources<sup>10</sup>, introduction of the world’s first long-term legally binding framework to tackle climate change was introduced (2008) and their contribution to international negotiations; “the UK was consistently in the vanguard of developed nations promoting international action

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on climate change”<sup>11</sup>. In 2005 Defra produced a guide to quality of life indicators that listed Five New Principles upon which the sustainable development strategy was based. Newly-introduced into Government thinking was a more explicit focus on Environmental Limits<sup>12</sup>. In its 2010 Evaluation of Environmental Policy Since 1997, the Institute for Fiscal Studies deemed the overall outcome of Labour’s policies as one of ‘steady progress’, but its critics have argued that “the Labour Government took some action that began to address climate change, but not nearly enough to tackle the extent of the problem as indicated by the science.”<sup>13</sup>

From 2006 - 2010, ‘politicisation of the environment’ reached an unprecedented level as a result of the high profile attached to the sector by David Cameron both during his bid for party leadership and the Conservative election campaign. Overall political commentators have deemed Cameron’s strategy aimed at ‘detoxifying’ the Conservative party’s environmental image a success<sup>14</sup>. This change has “transformed the environment into a field of intense party competition.”<sup>15</sup>

## Ideological Compatibility: Making the Case for the environment

The process of party ‘greening’ has also been described as an “unconscious absorption of the environmental movement by the political parties”, commonly attributed to Britain’s historically weak tradition of political expression through social movements and a strong precedent of political integration and accommodation<sup>17</sup>.

This absorption has not however, been an altogether easy one. The environmental movement fitted awkwardly with the political landscape and programme of issues that politicians were used to in the mid 20th century. Events since have shown the environment to be a “classic ‘new politics’ issue which cuts across the left-right cleavage”<sup>18</sup>.

Environmental activists from both the Labour and the Conservative Party, have fought to portray their political philosophy as congruent with the key principles of the environmental movement. These efforts have prompted resistance from opposing elements of the party, loyal to causes that clash with the goal of ‘greening’ their party. On such occasions, the ensuing internal party debate has revealed the differing motivations, interests and interest groups which incline each party toward or pit them against the interests of the environment. Such instances provide rich material for analysis and understanding of this subject.

This discussion paper is concerned with the following overlapping (and often confused) questions:

- What ideological foundations at the heart of Britain’s two major political parties have a) supported and b) inhibited the absorption and prioritisation of environmental issues.
- How have preferred delivery models for the Labour and Conservative Party’s affected their track record of environmental protection and shaped their reputation in his realm in the public eye?

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Whilst the preliminary question has been widely debated for many decades, the second has become relevant more recently. Left and right leaning politicians, traditionally advocate diametrically opposed approaches to the delivery of public services. Whilst the Labour party is characterised by a belief in public ownership and planned use of resources and a willingness to use regulatory mechanisms to intervene in the operation of the market, a cherished strand of modern Conservative philosophy is its faith in market forces and its commitment to privatisation and deregulation. Although more nuanced in reality, these caricatures broadly define the parties’ economic policies and exist prior to and independently of environmental issues. Over recent decades, these preferences have been superimposed upon environmental problems as they have come to the fore, with significant consequences upon for the fortunes of the environment versus other interests.

## The Conservative Party

*“There is much in Toryism and the intellectual tradition of Burke to stimulate Conservative interest in the environment.”*  
 Robinson (1992)<sup>19</sup>

Since becoming party leader in 2005, David Cameron has given the environment prominence in his ‘modernisation’ strategy for the Conservative Party. He has sought to dispel the image of a “property developing, polluting government”<sup>20</sup>, a rebranding effort complete with logo, with the Party’s red, white and blue torch emblem being replaced with a sketch of

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an oak tree in 2006. During the Thatcher era, the Conservatives attracted criticism around issues such as acid rain and nuclear waste, shouldering Britain with the title of the 'dirty man of Europe'. However, by the late 1980s the government sought, with reasonable success, to take a "firm and positive stand on international environmental issues such as the hole in the ozone layer and acid deposition, firmly rooted in scientific diagnosis."<sup>21</sup> Until David Cameron, Thatcher's successors had made limited attempts to strengthen Conservative policy on this issue, and an increasingly Eurosceptic party was often seen to be deliberately obstructing progressive European environmental legislation.

Despite Cameron's claim in May 2010, that his would be the 'greenest government ever'<sup>22</sup>, evidence suggests that Conservative Party's reputation in this area remains weak. A poll carried out in 2011 found that public trust in the Conservatives to 'protect the environment', remains the lowest of the three main political parties<sup>23</sup>. A Populus poll carried out several years earlier, looked at public trust in political parties honouring their environmental promises and found that a significant majority (53%) agreed with the statement 'I wouldn't trust the Conservative party to implement policies to help the environment'<sup>24</sup>. In 2010 the Government held a consultation on shaping the nature of England that led to the publication of the Natural Environment White Paper in 2012 and the creation of the Natural Capital Committee. The Committee's sole aim is to provide independent expert advice on the state of English Natural Capital<sup>25</sup>.

On the whole, the party's environmental track record since the 80's suggests its centre-right system of beliefs predispose its suppression of environmental issues in favour of other competing interests. But environmental groups and activists from within the party have argued the opposite, insisting on a "long-standing and deep-rooted affinity between the traditional Tory philosophy and conservationists' concerns."<sup>26</sup> Political scholars have made similar observations, with prominent authors on the subject such as John Gray arguing that "rather than possessing a natural home on the left, concern for the environment is most in harmony with the outlook of traditional conservatism of the British and European varieties."<sup>27</sup>

The reasons behind this oft-cited harmony are predominantly rooted in the 'guiding governing principles' that lie at the heart of the party, and less with the social outcomes that tend to underpin Labour's rationale to act. Complimentary ideological elements fall into four key areas, together creating a clear narrative for environmental protection.

## 1. A commitment to tradition and preservation of the past

The Conservative party was set up before any other in Britain (1832), and its origins date back even further, to the Restoration of 1660 – 1688. Generally viewed as the philosophical founder of modern Conservatism, Edmund Burke (1729 –1797) emphasised the importance of hierarchy, moral values derived from the religious traditions of Christianity and natural law, evolutionary reform and importantly tradition. The notion of a political and social responsibility to preserve the values and riches of the country is central to the political philosophy of 'traditional conservatism', one of the prominent ideological groups within today's Conservative Party. This shared instinct for preserving "what is good and fine and traditional around us"<sup>28</sup> has been the basis upon which Conservative MP's have claimed "the nature conservationist is a natural Conservative"<sup>29</sup>.

## 2. Appreciation of limits

Closely linked to the theme of tradition, is the Conservative distrust of heedless experimentation. According to David Pilbeam conservatives share environmentalists' understanding of limits, he cites Edmund Burke's "railing against a spirit of innovation"<sup>30</sup> and the tendency among Conservative parties to invoke the notion of limits when considering what change is acceptable and does not overstep sensible boundaries. Pilbeam extends this theory further than most claiming that "more, than simply a bare notion of limit [greens and traditionalist conservatives] share [...] the view that what defines these limits is deficiencies in human understanding."<sup>31</sup>

## 3. Attachment to the countryside

Recurrent and well known trends in the electoral success of the Conservatives in rural seats provides tangible evidence of the third common ground. A prominent environmental 'wet' of the Conservative party, Minister of State in 1985 and Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1994), William Waldegrave, emphasised that "It is the countryside with which Conservatives have always had a natural affinity and where they have also had strong support"<sup>32</sup>. In the Centre for Policy Studies' paper, 'Greening the Tories', Andrew Sullivan highlighted the traditional Conservative links to a "national culture deeply attached to the past and its physical surroundings"<sup>33</sup>. Often, pressure from this support base has forced the conservative party to take a more environmentally sensitive approach. In the mid 1980's, opposition from backbench Conservative MP's in the shires to proposed circulars on 'Green Belts and Land for Housing', and their pressure for strict land-use controls to be retained resulted in the amendment of these circulars. Similar sentiments may yet sink plans for a high speed train line between London and Birmingham.

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## 4. Stewardship and obligation to future generations

Paternalistic Tory sentiments which evoke the idea of stewardship of the environment come very close to the concept of intergenerational justice, a key principle of Bruntland's universally accepted definition of sustainable development. In 1984, Secretary of State for the Environment Chris Patten, wrote "we do not have freeholders' rights to the land we live in which allow us to do what we want with it. We are its trustees, obliged to pass what we inherited from the last generation to the next"<sup>34</sup> drawing strongly on the Burkean concept of society and government as "a partnership not only between those living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in his publication 'Caring for the Environment: A Policy for Conservatives' (1981), Stanley Johnson, author and Conservative MP put his environmental case to the party by stressing traditions of the Tory "sense that we hold land on trust for prosperity"<sup>36</sup> concluding that "not permitting random destruction and degradation is very much part of the Conservative spirit."<sup>37</sup>

### Thatcherite neo-liberal thinking

With so rich an intellectual tradition of 'harmony' with the environment, why have Conservative politicians struggled to build a credible record in this domain? The principle obstacles to Conservative success on the environmental agenda stem from its approach to economic management. The Conservative Party's desire to be non-interventionist, its belief in the free market and aversion to state planning, create a natural barrier to concerted action toward the damaging consequences of economic development upon the environment.

During the 1980's, calls for tighter planning in the countryside, public access to land, controls on factory emissions and the pollution of land, air and water, together with increased public spending, were met with Conservative assurances that "the market would be responsive and regulate itself, voluntary action would succeed in the place of control, and the private sector could deal with environmental problems far more efficiently and cost-effectively"<sup>38</sup>. The Thatcher government faced a dilemma between favouring its free market principles or the conservationism of the suburbs and the rural shire. The tension between a desire to simplify the planning system, accelerate decision making and ensure adequate land is made available for development on the one hand, and the party's obligation to "local authorities and a Conservative electorate demanding effective systems of local consultation and effective mechanisms of development control"<sup>39</sup> to conserve local amenities and the environment is well documented.

The neo-liberal radicalism that characterised the Thatcher era has left a strong legacy with the party, ensuring that this conflict of interest has become a recurrent theme since the 1980's. As Cameron's Conservatives came to power in 2010, Barry Goodchild noted in his paper 'Conservative Party Policy for planning: caught between the market and local communities' that "the tension is unlikely to disappear in the near future."<sup>40</sup>

Other beliefs which both characterise conservative political thought and obstruct environmental action include strong commitment to protection of Britain's national interest and a common suspicion of the precautionary principle. The Conservative reaction toward environmental directives emanating from Brussels, offers a useful case in point with which to understand some of these conflicts of interest.

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As the European Union has become an increasingly important source of environmental legislation in the UK, resistance among Conservative party ranks has often followed. Such a response is in keeping with well-known Conservative aversion toward European interference in British affairs, but specific complaints with regard to environmental directives have compounded these sentiments. Firstly, the cost of implementing measures have been viewed as burdensome to the British economy, costly for business and therefore against Britain's national interest. Second, there has been a perception among Conservatives that the European community relies excessively on the precautionary principle with respect to pollution control measures and a desire to see more extensive, robust scientific evidence as the basis of new legislation rather than references to 'emotion' statements<sup>41</sup>.

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## Vote Blue, Go Green

It is in the context of Goodchild's predictions that this subject is timelier than ever. The economic fortunes of the country together with mounting disgruntlement within the Tory ranks regarding Cameron's "pragmatic political case that greenery and liberal talk on social issues are crucial to future Tory success"<sup>42</sup> are once again exposing this long-standing divisive issue.

Over the past two years, the Conservative Government's actions have become increasingly divorced from Cameron's pro-environment and electoral pledges. In 2011, George Osborne earned cheers from the Tory right by attacking environmental regulation as "costly" and a "burden."<sup>43</sup> The Chancellor has been described by Labour as representative of Tories who "not only believe that the green agenda is bad for business, bad for jobs and bad for growth, but actively revel in contempt for environmental protection."<sup>44</sup>

Critics suggest that Cameron's cabinet reshuffle of 4th September 2012 has revealed the shallow nature of his election slogan "Vote Blue, Go Green."<sup>45</sup> The party's "renewed emphasis on growth and a desire to court business folk who feel neglected"<sup>46</sup> was made clear with the appointment of economic liberals to environment, transport and local government ministries who are keen to accelerate new housing developments, roads and airport runways. "The new Environment Secretary is a fan of shale gas"<sup>47</sup> and "an MP who once dismissed conservationists as 'Luddites'"<sup>48</sup> has reportedly been tasked with preparing new planning laws which may question Britain's historically sacred and inviolable Green Belt, although such changes have not yet been validated with concrete proposals from Downing Street.

## The Labour Party

*"There are strong areas of congruence between socialist and ecological theorists in their rejection of the capitalist organisation of production."*<sup>49</sup> Robin Cook (1984)

The beliefs underpinning Labour's political agenda, do not inherently rule out its support for environmental protection measures. In fact, the rationale behind many of the party's central values, are readily extended to the environment, in such a way as to justify the implementation of progressive environmental policies.

Charting its history in 'Greening of Labour' (1992), Neil Carter credits the Labour Party with "a respectable record of introducing regulatory legislation on many traditional environmental issues"<sup>50</sup>, including the 1947 Town and Country Planning Statues, the formation of the Nature Conservancy Council (1973), and adoption of the main piece of UK-initiated

environmental legislation of the 1970s, the Control of Pollution Act (1974).

Many Labour MP's have insisted that their allegiance to the environmental movement represents a revival of concern voiced by prominent socialists of the 18th and 19th centuries, rather than a novel appreciation of such issues. Emphasis on the importance of preservation of open spaces, conservation of the natural world, and the belief that people are products of their environment in order to justify its protection has been traced back to Libertarian socialists including Robert Owen (1771-1858), William Morris (1834 – 1896), John Ruskin (1819 – 1900), Edward Carpenter (1844 – 1929) and Robert Blatchford (1851 – 1943).

Labour's ideological base has been described by some as "less cohesive" than that of the Conservative Party, "reflecting not only its shorter political history of the party, but also the variety of principles it encompasses."<sup>51</sup> However, the existence of a set of core socialist principles to which the party uniformly subscribes, and which precedes its existence are those of "social justice, the equal worth of each citizen, equality of opportunity and community"<sup>52</sup>. It is this set of principles, which provide the driving force for many of Labour's environmental policies.

The most consistent and important ideological premise of Labour's action on environmental issues is the belief in the "injustice of the inequality of wealth and the consequent inequality within society"<sup>53</sup> this theme lies at the heart of Labour's position on the environment. More than two hundred years before the formation of the Labour party (in 1900), a group of Protestant agrarian communists known as the Diggers, advocated absolute human equality based upon socialist principles and "anticipated today's environmental green movements."<sup>54</sup> Their emphasis on the interdependency of the natural environment and human beings and explicit focus on the inequality of resource use and exploitation still resonates with Labour politicians today. The group's founder and leader, Gerard Winstanley, declared in the 1649 publication 'The True Levellers' Standard Advanced' that:

*"Man had Domination given to him, over the Beasts, Birds and Fishes; but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another... and that Earth that is within this Creation made a Common Storehouse for all, is bought and sold, and kept in the hands of a few, whereby the great Creator is mightily dishonoured."*<sup>55</sup>

In the 1970's and 80's the visible nature of pollution caused by industrial development starkly revealed the unfair distribution of the financial benefits relative to the worsening physical



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conditions which resulted from economic progress. The unequal distribution of wealth which grew more pronounced with the onset of the industrial revolution and Labour's traditional commitment to addressing this imbalance has thus been applied to the physical world to advocate equal rights to a healthy environment. The strong correlation between environmental prosperity, income and class in Britain strengthened the coherence of this narrative and has formed the basis of many of Labour politician's environmental campaigns. A paper published in 1973, titled 'The Politics of the Environment' observed that:

*"The pit owner never lived in the shadow of the slag heap. The soot from the factory chimney did not fall on the bonnet of the owner's wife. Those who spoiled the environment of the workplaces, which produced their profit, could buy themselves out of those surroundings. But the people whose labour created wealth for others were left with the noise, the dirt, the ugliness, the stench and congestion at every growing point of the capitalist enterprise."<sup>56</sup>*

The Labour Party Conference of 1986 saw Sawyer declare that "for many, certainly the poor and the disadvantaged, environmental decay crushes their development, damages the quality of their lives and limits their horizons."<sup>57</sup> With its natural support base among working class citizens disproportionately affected by pollution, Labour had a clear duty and motivation to tackle such problems.

David Clark, MP (1979-2001), former cabinet minister and author applied the principle of social equality to advocate the importance of policies for the environment stating that "everyone has a right to a clean and pleasant environment in which to live and work, whether they be rich or poor, black or white, urban or country dweller."<sup>58</sup> This approach fits with New Labour's commitments to ensuring equality of access to public services and goods and with the rhetoric upon this subject in particular.

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More recently, under the Blair and Brown Government's, Labour began to adopt domestic environmental policies which explicitly brought together social welfare targeting low income

groups with environmental goals. Its focus on fuel poverty and the assistance provided to replace inefficient boilers and improve the thermal properties of households through schemes such as Warm Front are examples of this strategy.

Finally, the Socialist principle of state intervention to manage public assets sits more comfortably with the hopes and demands of environmentalists. Regulated use of resources as opposed to a reliance on voluntarism (as preferred by proponents of Conservative laissez-faire approach) is understood by many as offering greater potential for state-led mitigation of resource exploitation. As public awareness and concern for the environment has grown, Labour's ability and willingness to use regulatory mechanisms, create agencies with extensive monitoring and enforcement powers has offered it greater freedom to introduce far-reaching policies and to appear more committed to environmental protection.

## **Tripping over its own ideological tail<sup>59</sup>**

Longstanding strategic and ideological dilemmas have, however, negatively influenced Labour's response to environmental degradation, opening the party to similar criticisms levelled at its opposition. Labour's interest in the environment during the 1970's and 80's has been dismissed as "sporadic and uncoordinated, which [...] simply reflected wider public indifference"<sup>60</sup>.

Traditional class-based socialism claims common ground with the Greens with regard to a concern with community, participatory politics, egalitarianism in resource distribution and activism. However, Britain's Labour party has traditionally been more comfortable with the gradualism of Fabian socialists, a less radical socialism than the "quasi-scientific view of socialism that is based on a notion of economic determinism"<sup>61</sup> and a greater emphasis on class. As such, Labour government's such as that of Neil Kinnock (leader between 1983 - 92) have often been accused of failing to recognise the unified system of values which characterised 'being green' and draw upon these socialist values to the extent necessary to develop its environmental thinking.

A consistent shortfall of Labour's absorption of environmental concerns has been its inability to "bring together fragmented elements coherently [...] integrating Labour's broad programme into its environmental policies"<sup>62</sup>. Instead it has been said that "with few exceptions, Labour talks about the environment only when it is talking about the environment"<sup>63</sup>.

Two recurring themes have obstructed Labour from the pursuit of progressive environmental policies.

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## 1. Jobs and Trade Unions

The party's "subconscious belief in an industrialised society with productivist traditions"<sup>64</sup> and the power of Trade Union forces have often constricted the politically viable options with regard to environmental measures and protection.

Whilst the Labour Party's Statement of Democratic Aims and Values attempts to direct the party toward addressing a de-industrialised society, the party's traditional support base lies in the industrial working class. The voice of trade unions which were instrumental in the formation of the party continue to carry great weight and these have frequently been opposed to the pro-environment proposals from within the party.

*"Primarily concerned with short-term considerations of job protection and wages, unions expect Labour to be committed to economic policies based on growth and have objected to environmental proposals that directly threaten the livelihoods of their members"*<sup>65</sup>.

Examples of the Labour party making overt gestures to satisfy Trade Unions to the detriment of its environmental credentials are numerous. Carter highlights the close proximity of the progressive landmark environmental publication 'Statement on the Environment' in 1986 with contradictory promises to the general unions in a document on Labour and the Motor Industry prior to this. The opposition which emanated from Trade Union leaders reportedly took two forms; "overt opposition involving direct lobbying by MPs or trade unions on specific issues along with a less overt, but probably just as effective overwhelming scepticism, and apathy towards environmental issues"<sup>66</sup>.

In times of economic difficulty the public association between environmental improvement and job cuts became more pronounced. In particular, during the late 1970's and 80's as Britain experienced stagflation, recession and mass unemployment, Labour's primary concern inevitably lay with such issues. As a result, the party "either ignored environmental issues or produced contradictory policy statements about them"<sup>67</sup>. A prime example of this is response provoked by the closure of nuclear plants, against which campaigners insisted "people must realise that all anti-nuclear lobbying is endangering employment"<sup>68</sup>.

Anti-environmental pressure exerted upon Labour policy from Trade Unions has certainly lessened over the decades since the 1980's. This has been in part a result of the increase in public awareness of environmental problems and partly due to a shift in their appreciation of the impact of environmental degradation upon "their members as citizens, not simply as employees"<sup>69</sup>.

## 2. A Middle Class Concern

The Labour Party has often struggled to support a political issue which has been stigmatised as a 'middle class concern'. In 1971, Crossland condemned "middle class environmentalists for wanting to kick the ladder down behind them"<sup>70</sup>. Indeed the environmental movement, represented by conservation groups of the 1960's and 1970's consisted of middle class socialist conservationist groups (in 1973 the Socialist and Environment Resource Association formed within the Labour party). These campaigns against damage to the countryside were viewed as "marginal to the mainstream labour movement" and alienated certain Labour members by "focusing on threats to rural peace, wildlife and beauty spots, while ignoring urban decay"<sup>71</sup>. It has been said that members of the party holding more left-leaning views remain hostile to the process of greening, due to the perceived social constituency and geographical location of many environmentalists.

### New Labour, New Problems

Since Labour's electoral defeat in 2010, a broad consensus judged the efforts of the Blair and Brown Governments to 'politicise' the environment as part of its modernisation, a failure. The emergence of New Labour, and the particular brand of ideology it championed, has been viewed as negatively affecting the party's ideological compatibility with the environment.

Neil Carter highlights the additional barrier to Labour's pursuit of environmental policies which came into play due to New Labour's "rapprochement with Thatcherite political economy that marginalised both old social democratic and post-materialist values and promoted business, lauded entrepreneurship and embraced neoliberal market values"<sup>72</sup>. The alterations in Labour's approach to the economy thus made it "less enthusiastic" about policy instruments which traditionally "appeal to social democrats and green parties alike", namely tough regulations and progressive taxation<sup>73</sup>.

With the rise of a consumer culture in full swing, New Labour's obligation and desire to support this levelling of material wealth. In the words of Michael Jacobs in his 1999 publication 'Environmental modernisation: the New Labour agenda', "New Labour identifies strongly, and wishes to be identified in the public mind, with ordinary families and their desires to get on in life"<sup>74</sup>. The "lifestyle compromises" implied by environmental policies were seen as "irrelevant and unappealing to its target voters. Middle England drives cars, enjoys shopping, wants to own more material things and to go on more foreign holidays". Jacob's interpretation of the friction between these New Labour goals and the environmental agenda takes this argument further than most, claiming that "New Labour [was]

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fundamentally suspicious of environmentalism [...] seeing the green movement as anti-aspirational”<sup>75</sup>.

## Conclusion: A schizophrenic approach

This series of papers has evaluated the compatibility of the ‘environmental movement’ with the ideologies of Britain’s two main political parties. It has asked whether the traditional values of these parties have enabled or obstructed the adoption and integration of this ‘new politics’ issue into their agendas, tracing the response of the Labour and Conservative parties to environmental challenges since the 1960’s.

Although environmental issues have become steadily more electorally salient, and politicisation<sup>76</sup> of the environment has followed apace, peaking in recent years, the consistency of both parties’ treatment of the environment has been slight. Rather than a gradual and sustained build up of interest, “the parties seem periodically to have rediscovered the environment as a political issue”<sup>77</sup>.

Engagement and environmental pledges, closely followed by total disregard toward previous policy statements indicates the severe difficulties in embracing environmental concerns for both parties. This has been understood as a symptom of their belief systems “with origins almost exclusively in an era of industrial and colonial expansion, which, by and large, have worked well for most of the late twentieth century.”<sup>78</sup> Comparison with the relatively comfortable relationship between Liberal Democrats and environmentalists further demonstrates this point, as “crucially, they have been historically free of the productivist interests – business and the trade unions – whose pro-growth aims have made the Conservative and Labour parties ideologically less receptive to environmental ideas”<sup>79</sup>.

However neither of the parties’ ideological grounding has uniformly obstructed their adoption of progressive environmental policies. This is because of the varied nature of values at the heart of Labour and the Conservative party. As Pilbeam points out:

*“Conservatism possesses no unitary meaning, with conservatives ranging from arch-traditionalists (typically concerned with defending authority and upholding cultural and moral absolutes) to committed devotees of the free market (who emphasize the priority of market relations and individual economic liberty). [...] Much of the literature implicitly operates with a simply two-fold distinction between free-market and traditionalist varieties, [but] the realities of contemporary conservatism are more*

*complex, [and] do not fit easily within the bounds of their conventionally assigned roles.”<sup>80</sup>*

This multiplicity of political thought applies to the philosophies underpinning the Labour Party in equal measure, and provides another crucial explanation for the conflicting attitudes toward environmental issues among members of the same party. Figures such as Chris Patten, William Waldegrave and Nicholas Ridley of the Conservative Party, and Labour politicians Tom Sawyer, David Clark and Michael Jacobs, have for example, found ample justification for a policies tackling environmental problems within the ideological texts of their parties. These elements have enabled the internalisation of the environmental agenda into Britain’s mainstream political parties and in doing so, have sustained often divisive internal party debates on the subject for many decades.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from a historical examination of the push and pull between opposing factions of each party, is the inability of environmental interests and their advocates to withstand periods of economic difficulty. When times are good, and elections being fought, both parties are often keen to boast their environmental credentials. The ideological tenets of the Labour and Conservative party offer the legitimacy and drive needed for politicians of both creeds to justify such claims. But the malleability of their belief systems has meant that this agenda is never secure, and often short-lived. Environmental activists are silenced once economic stability and success is seen to be under threat and the voices of those arguing that the economic costs of environmental protection are too great carry greater weight.

This tendency is more apt than ever today. Mr Cameron reportedly told one MP that it was necessary to “finish ‘level one’ (change the party’s image) before advancing to ‘level two’ ([..return to] traditional Tory strengths)”<sup>81</sup>. Today’s government, despite its previous portrayal as environmentally aware and its promise of being the ‘greenest government ever’ appears to be finding this position less and less tenable as powerful opposing ranks in the party stress the economic costs of such an approach. Shadow Energy Secretary, Caroline Flint, has warned that “we are fortunate in the UK that one of the legacies of Labour’s period in office was broad acceptance of the need to tackle climate change...[but] today, the question marks over the government’s green credentials have proliferated and raise genuine scepticism over whether the Government is sincere in its support for that consensus”<sup>82</sup>. It appears that once more, the environmental affinities between conservatism and environmentalism offered a convenient basis upon which to secure votes and power in 2010, whilst two years on, the narrow



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interpretation of this agenda as irreconcilable with Britain's economic interests, prominent among a powerful faction of the party, will likely now prevail.

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