

## Where are the Greens going?

Even if it turns out to be a mere flash in the pan, the result of the Euro-elections in Britain were rather remarkable. The Green Party polled some 2.3 million votes (one in seven of those who bothered to vote), overtaking the SLD (or whatever the Liberals are now called) and even pushing Labour into third place in six constituencies. This is the first time that a party to the "left", in conventional terms, of the Labour Party has been able to make such a breakthrough, even if it can be doubted whether most of its voters saw themselves as voting for a radical alternative to Labour.

That the Greens have a far more radical programme than Labour is not open to any doubt. While Labour now openly stands for trying to run the profit system better than the Tories, the Green Party has as its long-term aim the establishment of what it calls a "Sustainable Society". This it defines in its basic policy document *Manifesto for a Sustainable Society* as one in which "all constituents of the environment all activities under human control" are maintained in balance through not "using resources faster than they can be replaced, nor creating effects or products which cannot be assimilated indefinitely by the environment". Such a society could only function, the Green Party says, "within an interlocking system of small communities each as self-sufficient as possible in the necessities of life and in its own management", in which these "small, relatively self-sufficient, self-governing communities can coexist harmoniously within the framework of a greater nation and the World as a whole".

In a recent debate with the Socialist Party, the Green Party candidate for the London West Euro-constituency put it this way:

The Green Party . . . offers the concept of non-polluting, sustainable, human-scale communities. No one looking for more than they need. No one striving for more than they need. No one striving for more and more to dress up their lives. Why should they? A real community knows what it needs. It looks after its own and it cares for the people around it. The success of its neighbours is part of its own success. The success of its own broad reason is part of the success of each smaller part. And knowing how every community intermeshes within the world, each community will want success for each other, throughout the world. We see a Europe of Regions where each region is built as sustainable human scale communities, each more or less self-sufficient, each taking no more than it needs. Trade is almost unknown. The economy is run on sustainable lines. We see a Europe of regions where we have broken the power of the multinationals and set the agenda for all the Continent. We see a Europe of Regions that will be joined by the rest of the world (Jeremy Hywel-Davies, 5 May 1989).

So, what is being proposed is the abolition both of the world market, with the competition for resources and sales it engenders, and of existing centralised states, and their replacement by a worldwide network of smaller human communities providing for their own needs. This is a proposition so radically different from the profit-oriented national market economy Labour espouses that one Labour MEP, Carol Tongue, was moved to remark that it was "reminiscent of the visions of some early 19th century

French socialists" (*New Ground* No 16, Winter 1987/8), not that the Labour Party knows anything about socialism.

Although it would only be in the context of a socialist world that a worldwide network of decentralised, self-reliant communities could be established (not that this is necessarily the form socialism will take, though it is a form that has been favoured by some socialists, William Morris for instance), socialism is not in fact the right word since the Green Party and nearly all Green thinkers and writers see buying and selling as continuing within the smaller self-reliant communities they advocate (Murray Bookchin is one notable exception). Nevertheless, for a party committed to such a radically different conception of how society should be run to make a political breakthrough can only raise the level of political debate. Questions such as how can we free production from the tyranny of the world market, what are our needs, are smaller-scale human communities self-sufficient in basic needs desirable and possible, by what can we replace centralised states—these are the sort of questions that we would prefer to see people discussing rather than such irrelevant trivialities as should Britain join the EMS or would Kinnock make a good Prime Minister.

There is, however, the key question of how to get from here to there. The Green Party is committed to a gradualist, reformist strategy: seeking support on the basis of a programme of environmentalist reforms for the election of a Green Party government that would take steps to reduce Britain's dependence on the world market (by imposing import controls, discouraging exports).

Such a strategy won't work as the experience of the Labour Party has shown. The case of the Labour Party is relevant here in that they too originally set out to impose on capitalism something—in their case, social measures in favour of the working class—that was contrary to its nature as a profit-driven system. The Greens are also setting out to impose on capitalism something that is incompatible with its nature and, if their electoral support were to grow sufficiently to allow them to form the government, they would sooner or later come up against this restraint and learn that they could not proceed except at the expense of provoking an economic crisis, as inevitably happens when governments try to make the profit system work other than as a profit system, which would undermine their electoral support. Green government would then be faced with the choice of compromising with the system or abdicating. If the experience of Labour is anything to go by, they (or most of them) will compromise, justifying this on the grounds that a Green government of capitalism will at least be better than a Tory one.

A gap between the aims of Green Party activists and their voters is already evident. Very few of their voters in the Euro-elections will have voted for their long-term aim of abolishing the world market and centralised states; most won't even have voted for their programme of environmentalist reforms but simply used the occasion to express a justified concern about food contamination and pollution generally.

The Greens are facing the same choice of strategy as did the first socialists in Britain at the end of the 19th century: to build up support on the basis of the maximum programme of fundamental social change and remain small till people have become convinced of the need for the change in question *or* to build up support on the basis of

reforms within the system and grow faster but at the price of abandoning the maximum programme or relegating it to a vague remote, non-operational long-term objective.

This dilemma is recognised by some Greens and, interestingly, the same language is being used to categorise the two competing (mutually exclusive, in fact) strategies as came into use in the socialist movement. In their recent book *The Coming of the Greens* Jonathan Porritt and David Winner distinguished between environmentalists (or "light greens") and radical greens (or "dark greens"). Environmentalism, they say, "is essentially a reformist movement, based on the premise that industrialism can be perfected, or at least improved, to the point where it no longer endangers the environment". They add that "probably about 95 percent of the uses of the word 'green' fit into this category", as, we would add, do 95 percent of Green Party voters. As to the others:

By virtue of being so far removed from power, there has always been an irrepressible streak of utopianism within the Green Party. A good thing too, some would say, in a visionless age. But this utopianism has a tendency to degenerate into 'impossibilism', manifested in a series of green-prints for the future which seem oblivious of where we are starting from in the present.

If, or more probably as, the Greens continue their present strategy of building up support for environmentalist reforms within the system rather than for their longer-term aims, then the original members can be expected to be pushed aside by aspiring Centrist politicians, from within their own ranks as well as deserters from the moribund Liberals, and derided as "fundamentalists", "utopians" and "impossibilists". Then the vision of a radically different world to today's will be thrown overboard and we'll be back to discussing whether Britain should join the EMS . . . Alternatively, Greens who want a radical transformation of the world can stick to their principles but come to realise, as Socialists have done, that a sustainable society can only be achieved within the context of a world in which all the Earth's resources, natural and industrial, have become the common heritage, under democratic control at local, regional and world level, of all humanity.

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