

The Greens: reclaiming politics

Imagine a large circle with paling shades of green splaying out from a bright, incandescent centre. Around the edge the green blends in with many other colours, especially reds and oranges. Isn't this what the green movement looks like? Towards the periphery there are all kinds of "pale greens": the woman whose niece was cured by acupuncture, the man who was shocked by a TV documentary on disappearing rain forests and perhaps the old farmer who reminisces about traditional coppicing and hedge-laying. As we near the centre of the circle we meet the hard-core greens, those already convinced and active in local groups and networks.

As more and more people take up the "green" label, so we have to be very careful in how we use the word. It is in these early stages that the word will take on its new meaning. Ironically, and despite the growing excitement, the green movement in the political sense is still more of a concept than a reality. The potential exists, but there's no real sense of a movement yet. What we do have is a rapidly-spreading idea that the whole alternative and radical community could develop closer links and

a more coherent political challenge.

"Green" is the key word. It has the potential to unite a vast and diverse array of alternative and radical groups in this country if, and this is a big if, no single party or organisation succeeds in high-jacking the word for their own exclusive use. Nor must the word be associated solely with ecology and environmentalism. That would destroy its potential as an *inclusive* word for the whole alternative movement.

The first task facing greens is therefore that of building a coalition of the counter-culture. The potential of such a coalition is staggering, but before it can emerge there has to be a significant change of political consciousness within the wider movement.

We have to break out of sectarian and minority group politics. We have to begin thinking of ourselves as a single mass movement, not in any hierarchical or bureaucratic sense, but in a feeling of togetherness, mutual understanding and solidarity.

Peace activists, feminists, ecologists and libertarians have usually been thought of

as separate social movements. Yet when one looks closely at their history, we can see that their evolution has been closely linked. It's in the green movement, however, that such links are being most clearly expressed today. If we see ourselves as the counter-culture, it becomes clear that our main political task is the creation of counter-institutions; our own structures, based on consensus, participation and grassroots democracy.

When we do work through established, often fossilised, institutions we find ourselves trapped, dispirited and obliged to compete in those depressing patriarchal games—combating rituals, distorting and trivialising each others' beliefs etc. It is because of this that greens who choose to work through party politics find themselves divided against each other. Some maintain that in a two party system the only possible road to widespread change lies with the Labour Party. Others have chosen the Alliance and its commitment to proportional representation, pointing to the steady progress "up the ranks" of green Liberals like Michael Meadowcroft and Paddy Ashdown. For those who find green socialists or liberals hypocritical, there is always the Ecology Party. Each group believes fervently that their party is the right one for greens and thus we remain divided, both electorally and as a political force in general.

ELECTORAL ACTIVITY

Whatever our opinions on the validity of electoral politics, it's clear that greens haven't, at the moment, got much scope for successful intervention at a national level. Local elections can be a different matter altogether—working through the Labour or Alliance parties at that level can be rewarding. The GLC is a good example of what progressive-minded people are able to achieve.

Electioneering, though, is only one part of a green strategy for social change. The central thrust must come from community action and nonviolent resistance. Given the divisions over electoral strategy, greens could concentrate their energies in these areas anyway, as a basic tactical move. The importance of nonviolent resistance and community action is especially significant when we consider the impact they have on the individual. It's there, on the personal level, that real change must begin.

REDUCING DISTINCTIONS

We need structures that will unite rather than divide us; structures that more genuinely reflect our principles than political parties do. It's important to lessen the distinction between the workplace and homeplace, the producer and consumer, the practical and ideological, the personal and political. Our structures will need to be bonded together around common principles and specific campaigns rather than by a detailed examination of policy which will just cause unnecessary division.

We already have a starting point for such structures, not in already established national organisations, but in all the local projects that are actually putting green ideas into practice. In them we already have the beginnings of an alternative social and economic infrastructure. We don't have to wait for a green parliament, we already have organic farms, communes, wholefood shops, printshops, co-operative businesses, the Ecology Building Society etc etc...

This broad community already exists, but not in any one place. Co-operation, there-

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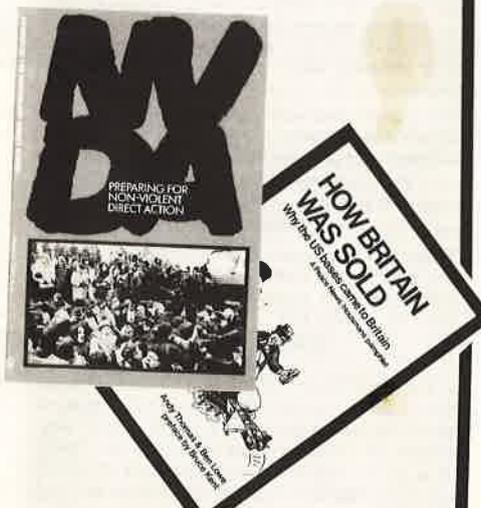
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fore, will have to develop over a fairly wide geographical area. County or city green federations could embrace all these different organisations, together with pressure groups, local political parties, trade union branches etc. There is no fundamental reason why such a broad range of groups shouldn't agree on a set of basic principles and then affiliate to some form of federation or network. This would lead to a sharing of resources, investment in new projects and a development of policy from the grassroots. It could eventually lead to a common electoral platform for the whole movement.

NO SCOPE

For the moment, though, the door to successful independent green electoral activity is firmly shut. There are two possibilities that might lead to a change in this situation. The first is proportional representation, without which we'll never win fair representation, at a local or national level. The second has to be the reform of

federations will have to begin with the formation of small independent green groups, which can act as catalysts or facilitators in their own areas, building links and helping launch new projects that put green ideas into practice—local magazines, co-ops, bookshops, gatherings etc. Such groups are now popping up all over the place. Some thirty-five are already established in places like Bradford, Swansea, Sheffield, Cambridge, Huddersfield and Canterbury. It seems likely that many more will emerge over the coming months.

In the same way as we need community based groups, so we need special interest groups like Transport 2000, the Socialist Environment and Resources Association, SDP Greens, and the British Holistic Medical Association. Access to land is a basic requirement for the green movement. As long as land is "owned" and controlled by those with money and influence there will be no genuine redistribution of wealth or shift in economic control. Despite this, land access is still a long way down the

people, of seven acres of Otmoor in the path of the proposed M40 extension.

Many ideas for land-based campaigns occur when we think of the likely campaigning issues for the next year: motorway extensions, more cuts in the rail network, the third London airport, acid rain, nuclear waste dumping in Bedfordshire and Cleveland and the erosion of Green Belt land.

The growth of such a movement will not be easy though. Murray Bookchin, writing in *The Vanguard* in June, said: "the establishment is...training 'special forces' for domestic as well as foreign control, sophisticating its surveillance technology, closing off information to the public and trying to meld the legislative and judicial branches of government into an increasingly imperial executive".

That's the US; in Britain similar patterns are emerging. The same establishment forces are pushing through changes to restrict local democracy, increased police powers to examine and inhibit the ac-



"national" party politics. At present every party or alliance attempts to fight every constituency in the country, regardless of the local circumstances. Constituency Labour and Liberal parties cannot form alliances without breaking the rules of their "national" party constitutions, and thus the anti-Tory vote remains firmly divided. Imagine the upheaval in political geography that would result if local parties started acting independently!

Such independent action is allied, in many ways, with the desire of the Scottish, Welsh and Cornish people for national independence or a greater degree of regional autonomy. A close look at the manifestos of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Mebyon Kernow (Cornish Nationalists) shows that they are all, broadly speaking, greener than the main British parties. Shouldn't we therefore be looking towards an alliance with such groupings?

Such thoughts are definitely for the long term, though; in the short term the whole process of developing regional or county

league table of priorities for most green activists.

The way forward, at the moment, seems to lie in the growth of peace camps and green gatherings. Although temporary, they do at least give us the space to begin thinking about "land rights" in our own context, here in Britain. Hopefully the future will see many more camps and gatherings, not just outside nuclear bases or reactors, but next to vivisection laboratories, in inner city areas, on remote hilltops etc.

In addition to temporary gatherings and camps, we might also start thinking of ways in which we can have a more permanent influence. The League Against Cruel Sports owns thousands of acres around Britain, all strategically bought with the specific intention of hindering local hunts by refusing them access. There is no reason why other groups shouldn't also think of ways in which they can gain control over strategic plots of land. Wheatley Friends of the Earth have shown the way with their sale, to three thousand

activities of social change activists. The civil liberties struggle is not for greater freedom but merely to hold on to the freedoms we already have, to safeguard the relative independence of the judiciary and to expose the intrusions into our private lives by secret police. Secrecy breeds paranoia and fear. That fear can only be countered by honesty and openness.

Can we overcome years of separate working, recognise that "peace" includes being at peace with our environment and that a healthy environment must include the freedom to participate in decisions that affect us? Can we open our eyes to a broader vision of social change? Can we start the process of interlinking that will become, in time, a new grassroots, citizen's network of county- and city-wide green federations?

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For details of the Green Collective, send a stamped addressed envelope to 4 Bridge House, St Ives, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire.