



The NY Salon presents

'The Human Footprint- Has Civilization Gone Too Far?'

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Eating the greens by Austin Williams

Environmentalists constantly complain that they are not taken seriously, that they get a bad press and that they aren't winning hearts and minds quickly enough to avert global devastation. It depends who you read, but various concerned environmental lobbyists suggest that we could have between 'a few years' and 50 years before Gaia pulls the plug on humanity (the 100 year Kyoto timescale is regularly put to one side these days) and understandably, these individuals are keen to intervene convincingly to save us from ourselves. Regardless of the legitimacy of their claims – their scientific claims as well as their claims to represent 'us' - it is interesting that many of them complain that they constantly find themselves let down by how little practical attention we're paying them. While they worry on our behalf, they point to the public's flagrant rejection of restraint, exemplified by growing car use, the ever-increasing demand for consumer goods and escalating non-renewable energy production amongst other things, as testament to the fact that they aren't getting their message across effectively. It's a confusing complaint for those like me who are interested in more human-centred politics, because, to me, it seems that rather than the eco-message being marginalized, there is in fact an incessant, domineering, environmental orthodoxy that seems to infect every issue under the sun.

As far as I'm concerned, the environmental message has been received loud and clear and is unfortunately the dominant frame of reference in the lives of most of the British public, increasingly so in Europe, and to a significant degree in the US. That is not to say that each of us diligently assesses our global footprint - that we turn off our TV standby, walk everywhere or bathe in recycled rainwater - but that the message that we *ought* to adopt 'responsible' behaviours to protect, preserve or respect the environment has been internalised by the majority of the public. Even those of us, like me, who don't buy it, sometimes feel guilty about not taking the bus. After all, to all intents and purposes, the politics of environmentalism is the only game in town and it's hard not to be ground down by its relentless calls for us to reduce, re-use and recycle. Rummaging in bins, and parcelling up your garbage is hardly the type of Big Idea that most of us expected to kick off the Millennium with, but if we don't actually do it, most of us feel a pang of contrition.

So regardless of our actual consumption behaviour, environmentalism is well and truly embedded in our social structures, political parties and individual responsibilities. A cursory glance at the BBC News service or TV schedules reveals just some of the mainstream programme itinerary that profess to be impartial examinations of climate change, but which have a very clear message to push. The clues are very often in the titles. The BBC leads with 'Global Dimming'; 'Ethical Man'; 'Climate Chaos'; 'Planet Earth'; 'Extinct'; 'It's Not Easy Being Green' and radio's 'Planet Under Threat' 'Costing the Earth'; 'Home Planet'; but then there's Sky's 'Climate Change Week'; ITV's '3 degrees from disaster'; and Channel 4's 'War on Terra' series. In America, PBS have shown 'PBS KIDS Share the Earth Day'; 'The State of the Planet's Wildlife'; 'Dimming Sun'; the Sundance Channel's 3-part 'The Green'; HGTV's

'Living with Ed' with Ed Begley; or MSNTV's *'E-Topia'* with Leonardo DiCaprio; notwithstanding the earthy Ray Mears, the late Steve Irving and recent environmental convert, David Attenborough. There's even a United Nations Environment Programme/Greenpeace dedicated *'GreenTV'* digital channel. Most of these programmes are examples of 'call-to-action' TV, whereby the objective is to encourage viewers to engage with environmental initiatives. They are often produced with such a high-minded, moral mandate, that criticism – on any level - is almost deemed to be beyond the pale. This tele-cultural bandwagon, taken together with the practical reality of the increase in car-share schemes, no-car housing projects; zero-emissions buildings, the plethora of recycling bins (containing glossy environmental-columns); the interminable rise of green consultancies, carbon-trading schemes, eco-allowances, eco-penalties, government consultations, global warming treaties and climate change levies, it all seems to suggest that the moral case for environmentalism - and for personal consumer restraint – is all around us. The fact that we don't live up to it is hardly surprising. Thankfully, most of us have better things to do.

In the contemporary political climate where no meaningful, polarised, ideological battles seem to exist, concern about the environment has become all-pervasive, whether we agree with it or not. It is a bi-partisan issue and infects every pronouncement; from President Bush's 'addicted to oil'¹ transport strategy to UK's 'sustainable' education policy. Admittedly, it frequently operates on a subconscious, subliminal level but it represents the new moral orthodoxy of our times. When UK Prime Minister Tony Blair says, 'I'm not going to be in the position of saying I'm not going to take holidays abroad or use air travel, it's just not practical'² he not only reflects the truth about a modern jet-setting politician, but neither does it stop his government from commissioning a key report that concludes that 'ambitions and dreams of extensive new (transport) networks... should be put on hold... some of the best projects are small-scale, such as walking and cycling.' It doesn't necessarily mean that it's a paradox, it's simply condescension.

For example, Al Gore seems to have shot most of the footage for his film *'An Inconvenient Truth'* – hinting at the evils of flying – some 35, 000 ft above sea level as he travelled to various exotic destinations. Similarly, British economist Nicholas Stern who wrote *'The Economics of Climate Change'* for UK Chancellor Gordon Brown – has just come back from a world air tour dedicated to telling the under-developed countries about the dangers of carbon-intensive powered flight. The practical reality of a modern, globe-trotting, environmental zealot is one of business class air travel... but small-scale, local and parochial transportation is 'the message' that is being delivered.

This is not as inconsistent as it seems, but it is ironic that while the meagre, navel-gazing, penny-pinching philosophical precepts of environmentalism have become mainstreamed in the public's consciousness, that environmentalists are in such a quandary about the efficacy of their message. While some greens recognise that they now have to emerge from single issue campaigning and develop a more tangible, political engagement with the real world as it is (rather than the world as they say it will be), such is the self-imposed fragility of their political case that they are often frightened of putting their heads above the parapet. For if, as they argue, 'profligate' human action is deemed to be the cause of prospective global devastation, it is difficult to overcome their inherent misanthropy and self-loathing to develop a human-centred rallying cry. For example, British environmentalist George Monbiot hoped that, at the very least, his book, *'Heat: How to stop the planet burning'* would "make people so depressed about the state of the planet that they stay in bed all day, thereby reducing their consumption of fossil fuels".

The UK's pro-market Globalisation Institute criticises the old approach: 'too often' it says, 'in discussions about the environment, a very negative, pessimistic approach is adopted. This negative environmentalism, full of doom and gloom, is a school of thought which thinks that improving the environment has to be done through restricting foreign holidays, limiting trade, only buying locally, or curbing GDP. It regards the rise of India and China with dread. Economic growth is seen as finite: the West, in this view, has become rich at the expense of the planet, and there are simply not enough resources to sustain economic prosperity in the, emerging economies.'³ They then go on to challenge this mainstream eco-miserablism but unfortunately, given that environmentalism demands social restraint – self-imposed or

centrally-imposed – the essence of environmentalism will continue to undermine the ambition for a more positive vision of the future, however you spin it.

Environmentalism, by its very nature is founded on the notion that humans are responsible for harming the planet (regardless of the counterclaim that humans can repair it). If humans are the problem - as they argue – then human solutions can only, at best, be viewed with suspicion. This is why environmentalists seek constantly to monitor our behaviour. This managerial mindset is exemplified by the phrase, 'Reducing our footprint' which conveys the notion that we, as humans, are too profligate and that we need to cut back. Today, many consider the gas-guzzling, carbon emitting car to be the greatest threat to humankind that we know, but fuel-efficient cars, by the logic of environmental harm, are not the answer. Amory Lovins assessed that we would simply buy more of the improved versions, cancelling out the carbon efficiency gains?⁴ This response typifies the spirit of the age: even if something is a technological improvement for people's lives, environmentalists may block its development if in some tenuous, unforeseen, contentious way it can be deemed to have the potential to cause a detrimental impact on the environment in the far-off future. Such harm is now so liberally defined, and the fear of causing it so widely avoided, that experimental technologies are few and far between.

It hardly goes without saying that efficiency drives for better, more productive modes of energy use, for example, are sensible advances over wanton modes of energy production and distribution and few people would argue that profligacy is a good thing, per se. But the time, energy and effort expended in complying with the proliferation of ephemeral environmental criteria is a visible example of Amory Lovins' preference for resource efficiency over labour efficiency.⁵ Making products work harder for you, regardless of the amount of time you have to put in to justify their use, is a poor kind of efficiency. It is the efficiency of the slave-owner. The purpose of this article is to state that the underlying idea behind environmentalism - that of restraint (environmental or otherwise) - is nothing to be proud of. It is, in fact, a dangerously restrictive agenda that will have serious repercussions for our ability to take society forward for the real benefit of future generations. False productivity gains are the logical consequence of accounting for 'resource efficiency' rather than labour efficiency. 'Reducing one's footprint' is a guilt-laden, restrictive, authoritarian slogan that builds on Girardet's call for 'prudent consumption'. Suddenly, whether it's Ted Turner or Jared Diarmid, Malthus has reared his ugly head once again in polite society. James Lovelock's demand 'for a constraint on the growth of population' is today met with barely a murmur of disapproval. 'What?' people might say, 'you're in favour of more people? Don't you know that the earth can't cope'. QED, apparently. The pathetic counter-argument is to permit current population levels provided that we reduce consumption levels accordingly. Consume less, or create fewer consumers, it gets the same result.

The absence of a critically engaged public discourse on environmental matters – and political culture more generally – caused by the closing down of public debate around environmental concerns, means that 'green' issues have entered the public domain as mantras rather than propositions to be debated, fine-tuned and rejected/accepted according to their own merits. One of the curious consequences of this un-contended situation is the inability of the environmental 'movement' to believe in their own moral high-ground. In truth, their elevated status has been given to them, rather than won. Undoubtedly, the flimsy nature of their social standing is certainly something that humanists (in critical distinction to environmentalists) can capitalize on, but the cynicism about human motives that environmentalists have generated over the last two decades means that it will still be difficult even for humanists to create a political dynamic for human-centred change. There is now some trouble in the environmental camp, but before we get too enthusiastic about the greens eating themselves, we should realise that, left to its own devices, this could create an even greater, misanthropic void in political life. Even though environmentalists are not solely to blame for today's political malaise, their cynicism about human-centred actions has been, and continues to be, corrosive.

That corrosion has consequences for the environmental movement as much as everyone else. As the environmental message has become more and more mainstreamed, questions

have been asked about the credibility of the environmental movement *by* environmental movement fellow travellers.

I don't want to overstate this, because environmentalism is still the dominant (the only) frame of reference for political activity today and is beginning to get its feet under the corporate table, but over the last few years, and with a gathering momentum over the recent months, the environmental movement seems to have lost a lot of its coherence. Arch-environmental campaigner George Monbiot has even launched a campaign to 'out' environmental hypocrites – those, like Coldplay's Chris Martin who's recent album was dedicated to the poor of the world while he had the audacity to fly to and from gigs in a private jet. Monbiot says: 'Chris Martin claims to care about the poorest people on earth. Why then does he seem to be mounting a one-man campaign to sweep them off the planet?'⁶ Campaigns to expose the abuses of the environment by erstwhile paragons of the environment is a significant shift in the dynamics of environmentalism. It indicates a sense of having been left behind by those who 'sell-out', but it also reveals an angst-ridden inability to reconcile abstract environmentalism with practical reality. The constant hectoring tone of environmentalists – especially the rich ones – telling us to consume 'prudently' and behave 'responsibly' is beginning to gall. Over the last decade or so in the UK, elected government officials have had the presence of mind to delegate environmental decision-making down to grass-roots level so that it can be absolved of blame. Environmentalists, however, *are* the grass-roots level and they, like us, are growing somewhat uncomfortable with it.

One way of dealing with it is to wear one's angst on one's sleeve. Monbiot boasts that 'most environmentalists – and I include myself in this – are hypocrites'. So just like witch-hunting in the Dark Ages, a confession seems to be the only road to salvation in the future. This fratricidal charge of 'hypocrisy' may indeed end up with the environmental movement engaging in a cannibalistic feeding frenzy, but actually, it doesn't challenge anything; in fact it simply highlights the importance of environmental criteria by exposing those that don't live up to them. The fact that environmentalists have hyped up the evidence-based justification for their existence (however much the actual science of global warming has been disputed by others) means that they see success through the prism of tangible evidence-based results and have ended up as tick-box, check-off managers of good behaviour.

But Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, environmentalists with impeccable eco-credentials note that 'the entire landscape in which politics plays out has changed radically in the last 30 years, yet the environmental movement acts as though proposals based on "sound science" will be sufficient to overcome ideological and industry opposition. Environmentalists are in a culture war whether we like it or not.'⁷ While Al Gore wrote in 1992, 'we must make the rescues of the environment the central organising principle for the world'⁸, the next generation of Americans say 'Environmentalism is dead; long live the environment!'.⁹

Nordhaus and Shellenberger's report entitled 'The Death of Environmentalism' didn't really mean that environmentalism was dead, simply that the environmentalist cause has reached a hiatus and needed to be reinvented in a new, more politically pragmatic guise. Enter political pundit, George Lakoff, who says that 'most environmentalists believe that the truth will make you free. So they tell people the raw facts... (but) Raw facts won't help, except to further persuade the people who already agree with you.' Instead, he advocates 'frames' – reference points or spin that can connect directly to the public's aspirations, as opposed to badgering them to live more frugally. 'When environmental issues are cast in terms of health and security, which people already accept as vital and necessary, then the environment becomes important.'¹⁰ His radical view of US trade protection embracing environmental survivalism sits nicely with the retrenched mood of the time. As Robert F Kennedy says, environmentalists love of nature 'connect(s) us to our history, give(s) context to our communities and form(s) the foundation of American culture, our art, literature, poetry and architecture.'¹¹ Or as a more hawkish OpEd piece suggested in the New York Times recently, 'Real patriots, real advocates of spreading democracy around the world, live green. Green is the new red, white and blue.'¹²

In this way, environmentalism is charged with playing the politically cohering role that US and UK politicians crave, while economically, they believe that it can be incorporated to provide a

new dynamic to production. While it is a nice idea, I don't believe that it can deliver meaningfully on either. Alternative energy and recyclable materials is definitely a growth sector and Lovins¹³ pointed out long ago that those companies not buying into environmental markets will become uncompetitive as the market moves towards ethical/environmentally responsible business practices. But this is not really innovation; it is innovation with one hand tied behind its back. The new innovative sectors include: hydrogen fuel cells, thin solar technology, build-a-better-wind-turbine, or biodegradable materials. All admirable in their own way, but liberated from the potential to be even better because of the imposition of an environmental frame of reference. Having to innovate without causing environmental harm maybe a noble goal in some respects, but when environmental safety is the *driver* for innovation it ceases to be innovation, almost by definition. Also, the policing of the inevitable mandatory environmental standards can only be a recipe for personal and corporate caution. Where there is productive innovation as we know it – predominantly in the electronics and technology sector – even that sometimes fails to meet the objectives of the environmental zealots. IT Wire points out that 'Greenpeace's 2006 "Green Guide to Electronics" ranks Apple 14th out of 14 tech companies'. One of its central criticisms was that 'Apple fails to embrace the precautionary principle.'¹⁴ Innovation will continue to thrive but unfortunately the proliferation of risk assessments, hazard audit trail and environmental spreadsheets, will make an otherwise *straightforward* exercise into a *straightjacket*

I believe that the logical consequence of an unquestioning acceptance of limits, reduced resource use and individual responsibility - the essential ingredients of the environmental agenda - is a tendency towards small-thinking, while pretending that we're looking at the Big Picture. Unfortunately, without a critical appraisal of the problem and an open-ended debate on possibilities we are simply accepting a new and slightly more cynical spin on the old environmentalist agenda.

There is, however, one aspect of the Nordhaus and Shellenberger model that is a lesson to us all, on both sides of the debate. They point out that for the last 15 years, 'environmentalists have publicly debated global-warming deniers under the assumption that a) they can actually "win" the debate and b) once the public learns "the facts" things will start to change. What they should have done instead is built support for an agenda that inspires people regardless of whether they believe global warming is real. The result has been politically disastrous.'¹⁵

¹ President Bush, State of the Union address, January 31st 2006.

² Will Woodward and Nicholas Watt, 'Blair, Monday: I'm not offsetting carbon. Blair, yesterday: Er, i've had a rethink', The Guardian, January 10th 2007-01-16

³ 'Positive Environmentalism: A Convenient Truth' ed Tom Clougherty, The Globalisation Institute, London, 2007

⁴ Amory Lovins, 'Factor Four: Doubling Wealth, Halving Resource Use', 1998

⁵ 'sustainable development...will very likely induce the world to stop overexploiting resources and underusing human labour', Amory Lovins et al, page 208

⁶ George Monbiot, 'Turning up the heat' http://www.turnuptheheat.org/?Page_id=16

⁷ 'The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World', Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, The Breakthrough Institute, 2004
http://www.thebreakthrough.org/images/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf

⁸ 'Earth in the Balance – Forging a New Common Purpose', Al Gore, Earthscan: London, 1992

⁹ 'Requiem for Environmentalism', The Harvard Crimson, April 20, 2006 2:21 AM
By Piotr C. Brzezinski and Piotr C. Brzezinski

¹⁰ 'Winning Words', Sierra Club, <http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/200407/words.asp>, July/August 2004

¹¹ Robert F Kennedy, 'For the Last, Stubborn Holdouts on Global Warming', The Huffington Post blog, 16th January 2007, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-f-kennedy-jr/for-the-last-stubborn-ho_b_38837.html

¹² 'The New Red, White And Blue', Thomas L. Friedman, The New York Times, January 6, 2006

¹³ 'The simple reason is that by increasing resource productivity can be a highly profitable, and 'picking up £20 notes in the street' has been an expression for much of this agenda', Lovins et al, op cit, page 249

¹⁴ 'Apple not so green when it comes to the environment, says Greenpeace' Adam Turner, 10 December 2006, <http://www.itwire.com.au/content/view/7936/53/>

¹⁵ 'The Environment: Death and Rebirth', Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, The American Prospect, October 2005