

‘Official! – climate change is real’. Now: what is to be done?

A Green House Gas by John Foster

Towards the end of August 2018, a letter initiated by the Chair of Green House, Rupert Read, and co-signed by him and a list of sixty eco-luminaries headed by Sir Jonathon Porritt, appeared in *The Guardian*.¹ This letter pledged its signatories “no longer...to lend our credibility to debates over whether or not climate change is real”. The common media practice of giving a platform to deniers, in the interests of ‘balance’, when climate-related topics are discussed was firmly declared to be obsolete. Just as items on the effects of smoking don’t now include tobacco-industry lobbyists rubbish links to cancer, so fringe views on climate change, whether cynically or ignorantly held, shouldn’t be lent spurious respectability by being presented as if they were seriously debatable, and the signatories would no longer be encouraging such a practice by participating in discussions thus ‘balanced’.

In the first week of September, the same paper reported on a high-level BBC staff briefing just issued, which made it clear that programming expectations had changed: “To achieve impartiality, you do not need to include outright deniers of climate change in BBC coverage, in the same way you would not have someone denying that Manchester United won 2-0 last Saturday. The referee has spoken.”² The briefing, as reported, didn’t go so far as actually to mention the eco-luminaries, but its emergence a matter of days after the publication of that *Guardian* letter is hugely unlikely to have been a coincidence.

This démarche – a blunt public refusal on the part of what can fairly be called the green-political establishment to accept any longer the framing of anthropogenic climate change as a debatable proposition, and *the prompt acceptance of this refusal* by a media organization deeply embedded in the more traditional establishment – marks a very significant moment in the process of facing up to climate reality. Its significance, indeed, is perhaps greater for the future of Green politics than all the signatories of that letter (who included the UK Green Party’s elected members of the Westminster and European Parliaments) may have fully

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/aug/26/climate-change-is-real-we-must-not-offer-credibility-to-those-who-deny-it>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/07/bbc-we-get-climate-change-coverage-wrong-too-often>

appreciated. For, once we start from the position that looming climate danger isn't one possible interpretation of the evidence, but what the evidence now decisively demonstrates to be how things really are, we have in consistency to start similarly from the position that how things really are can't be treated as just *one possible basis* for organising our socio-economic and political life.

Green politics has always been an uneasy combination of campaigning to raise consciousness about environmental harms, and trying to get people elected to bodies which could change the systems and activities producing those harms. (Generally, of course, it has had to settle for 'greening' those from the mainstream parties who do get so elected, in the first place by capturing some of their votes.) As a result, greens have found it very easy to suppose that successfully raising consciousness in the voters is a precondition of gaining political *legitimacy* for the necessary changes. This thought is encouraged by so much of environmentalism's appearing to be an essentially ideological option, like neoliberalism or more collectivist modes. "Vote for us if you'd like to see greater emphasis on conservation, organic agriculture, community self-reliance..." – and when people largely don't, that's their choice until the next electoral round, a choice to which democracy requires us to defer. Over climate change, however, democratic preference has to yield place to the starkness of existential jeopardy. "Vote for us if you think climate change must be addressed as a deadly serious threat" – and when they don't (that is, when they downplay the threat by declining to endorse the only political programme with any hope of so addressing it), they've got it *wrong*, and things are now simply too dangerous to be remitted on that basis to the next time around. For the danger is no longer that climate change might have disastrous consequences, but that the disastrous consequences which are now effectively inevitable will, unaddressed, run away unstoppably towards catastrophe.³ And in the face of peril of that order, what legitimates action to confront it is the peril itself, not whether or not people recognise it.

This is not, to be clear, the argument – as old as Green politics itself – that the electoral route is just too slow. Certainly, that argument now has far greater traction than ever: at the rate of

³ Natural science tells us, in the IPCC report just out (http://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf), that more than 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels will have disastrous effects on the biosphere. Social science, empirical observation and elementary common sense all tell us that keeping to this limit is quite *unachievable* politically by mid-century, which is all the time we have left. (See, for instance Jem Bendell 'Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy' (2018) available at <https://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>, or Rupert Read 'Some thoughts on "civilisational succession"', available at <http://www.truthandpower.com/rupert-read-some-thoughts-on-civilisational-succession/>.)

progress so far achieved, even in countries with sensible voting systems (never mind in Britain, where forty years of campaigning has produced one MP), there will be no majority Green government until we are all well over our heads in the melted Polar ice. But the point here is essentially the epistemic one that persuading people to vote is not in this case a rational way of establishing what's urgently real. Even where voting *can* legitimately be used to determine a balance of probability (as for example, with due constraints, by juries), that is because judgements have to be made on inconclusive evidence and as to the reliability of conflicting testimony – and they are made only after enforced attention to relevant arguments, and through careful deliberation. But here, not only are the large majority of those whose votes are solicited disabled – by long exposure to the gutter press and the television, and most recently and insidiously to 'social media' – from giving more than fleeting and confidently ignorant attention to anything which presents itself, but the evidence is now anyway conclusive and the qualified testimony effectively unanimous. What the electorate at large chooses to think about it is therefore something which the necessary action must deal with, but not something upon which it can responsibly wait.

How have we reached a situation where this even needs saying? How has democratic politics transgressed beyond its proper role of negotiating consent for ways of tackling whatever is generally agreed to confront us, to become an illegitimate arbiter of the facts (or, even more scarily, the alternative facts) from which action must start? Briefly (and no doubt tendentiously, but this is only a short article) the public realm has been corrupted by a situation in which a populace widely incapacitated for judgement by the conditions outlined just above is also encouraged by those same conditions to suppose that its point of view on every matter, both of opinion and of fact and however complex, demands respect – while a largely complicit political-intellectual class has spinelessly conceded the demand. The recent worldwide rise of peculiarly brash and rootless forms of populism is evidently a closely connected phenomenon. Or, here at home, consider Brexit. If the question is taken to have been 'Do we want to cease being part of a multi-national economic and quasi-political union, *whatever the costs?*', then the Leave 'spasm' (in Vince Cable's choice phrase) had a certain degree of democratic legitimacy, albeit far less than the carefully reached decision of a properly representative parliament would have had. If instead, however, the issue was whether we should be *materially better off* outside the EU (as the liars of the Leave campaign insisted clamourously that we should), and the vote is taken as 'Britain's decision' about *that*, then it lacked legitimacy of any kind, since such a complex question could not conceivably be

given a meaningful answer, whether yes *or* no, just by counting millions of muddled heads.⁴ But the misconceived and irresponsible referendum allowed these two orders of question to be fatally confused together. Hence the current sterile squabble between hardline Leavers who take the result exclusively in the first sense, and Remainers who point to its increasingly obvious failings in the second.

We are probably stuck, at least for some while, with what we might as a convenient shorthand for the foregoing analysis call the Brexilectorate. But suppose just for the sake of argument that we weren't. Suppose that voters at large had accepted, in full understanding, that climate change was real, and would involve a series of major disasters for their children and grandchildren, and quite likely for their later selves – and had nevertheless voted to do nothing serious about it, even so, because the required changes in present lifestyles would be too dauntingly drastic. Would respect for democratic procedures bind us – that is, informed and concerned greens – to accept that outcome?

That is the crunch question which the *Guardian* / BBC démarche now exposes bleakly to view, and I submit that the answer is plainly *No*. In such a case, properly human responsibility would demand that those in positions of power or potential influence, or even just with political organisation at their disposal, should *act anyway*, in preparation for (and to the extent possible, defence against) oncoming disaster. They could certainly hope that increasingly grim experience would start to change minds about the desirability of the necessary measures, but their prior commitment would be to ensuring, as far as they could, that conditions prevail in which changing minds could still make any difference.

How much more, then, is such action demanded from those who know the facts, when the Brexilectorate chooses to ignore climate reality while the imminent perilousness of that reality has been decisively confirmed by the best science? What calls pressingly for recognition, in fact, is that we are now in a *tragic* situation – that is, one where nothing can be done without the grievous loss of some great good. The establishment of democratic procedure as the sole source of legitimacy for political action was, even admitting its recent

⁴ This is not to suggest that being materially better off would have been a *sensible* Brexit goal in any case, since as presently understood it entails further economic growth which will further jeopardise the human habitability of the planet. The issue here is just the authority, or lack of it, ascribable to popular opinion on such matters.

corruption, a very great good – and may become so again. But for now, tragically, its forms and constraints must be up for sacrifice when the survival of civilisation is at stake.

So how could, for instance, the UK Green Party (or some organization evolving from it) actively pursue the political changes necessary to prevent climate disaster running away from us into climate catastrophe, without waiting for majorities (or minorities substantial enough to frighten the mainstream into action) to be convinced by its campaigning? Various approaches could be suggested, and what follows is only one such. It indicates, however, what I take to be the broad *kind* of transition within Green politics which is now required.

Basically, Greens need to infiltrate, co-ordinate and start to give political direction and cohesion to a wide variety of existing civil-society activities from which the successor environmental state will have to be built. These include:

- Transition town organisations
- ‘Sustainable Scunthorpe’ (and similar) projects
- Local food and other resource co-operatives and market arrangements
- Community transport and furniture operations
- Local currency set-ups
- School governing bodies
- Village hall committees and other local amenity bodies
- Town and Parish councils
- Wildlife and nature protection organisations

Other targets will occur to readers thinking about their own communities. These various civil-society activities represent strands of local self-reliance, presently disparate, which will have to be knitted together opportunistically to form the sinews of the locally-organised economies, energy supply arrangements and governance structures on which we will increasingly depend in the still habitable regions of the Earth as fossil-fuel-based systems come under breaking strain. They are the building-blocks for subsidiarity created from the bottom up as the globalising project fails⁵. Some of them, for instance Transition Towns, are already largely aware of themselves in essentially that role (or the not dissimilar one of preparing for ‘energy descent’ following ‘peak oil’). Others may have arisen to address

⁵ See for instance Helena Norberg-Hodge and Rupert Read *Post-growth Localisation* (Local Futures and Green House, 2016), available at https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/post-growth-localisation_pamphlet.pdf

specific needs in response to the retraction of welfare functions by the capitalist state, rapidly accelerated under post-2010 austerity but in fact originating with Thatcherism; and still others may simply be traditional community self-help initiatives. Those in these two latter categories may have no thought of any overarching Green rationale for their work, and some readers may object that seeking to co-opt them to a Green-political project without (at least initially) their consent, is making use of them. But part of our tragic situation is that such considerations cannot any longer weigh heavily in the balance. To repeat, dealing with how things are must now take priority over ideally democratic courtesies.

The point of starting to draw these initiatives together into the outline form of shadow local administrations is not, however, just anticipatively practical – putting systems provisionally in place to ensure at least basic resources and services locally as the globalised economy unravels and the fossil-fuel state withdraws to basic night-watchman functions of national defence, border security, upholding the legal system and maintaining essential national infrastructure. It is also importantly propagandist: an excellent way of winning essential consent by bringing people to recognise, as they become aware of hard-nosed local preparation along these lines, that climate disaster is really to be expected, here on this bit of ground. Such work would also emphasise better than could any manifesto the tragically-qualified nature of the transformative hope to which an overarching Green programme must now appeal.

Work with all these bodies would of course need to be undertaken in a carefully planned way, requiring:

- a very thorough and integrated audit of possibilities, locality by locality;
- strategic planning for priority targeting;
- creation of a template for shadow Green local administrations;
- where possible, the bringing of such shadow ‘Local Green Committees’ into whatever forms of present operation look feasible, without disrupting the effective functioning of their components in current circumstances; and perhaps, in parallel to all this,
- the creation of coordinating national-level bodies to act as a shadow Green government, both for propaganda purposes and to ensure effective liaison between locality organisations.

It should be clear by this point why such a programme would require some organisation *evolving from* the Green Party. While many of its current members are likely to be caught up already, in an *ad hoc* way, in locally-based civil-society activities, what we are talking about here is a meticulously planned and centrally-coordinated political operation for which the Green Party as it stands – with its quasi-autonomous local branches and regions, proliferating committees and essentially powerless Executive – completely lacks the structure, focus or discipline. Before aspiring to transform society, that is, the Party needs to face up to climate reality by transforming itself, and fairly dramatically.

Again, it is plain that bottom-up social transformation of the kind to which I have been pointing is a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for giving ongoing civilization a chance in favoured areas. Top-down intervention will also be necessary. For example, there will be the need to form and support cells of green-minded professionals in the civil service, the legal and financial sectors and (increasingly important) the armed forces, who will be able to have their hands close to vital levers of power when the time comes. Here too, though, nothing can be hoped for without the scrupulous planning and central co-ordination which the currently-configured Green Party simply isn't up to.

Of course, the kind of politics in which it *is* currently up to engaging will continue to be relevant. The locally autonomous activities of holding fundraising events, delivering leaflets, knocking on doors for candidates with at best an outside chance of election, even interminably tweaking a policy portfolio which offers to micro-manage revolution: all that could happily go on, and a persisting presence on ballot papers would remain useful in the business of educating the public. It could even, as breakdown accelerates and recognition that the Greens were right all along follows in its train, start electing people in more significant numbers to established representative bodies, especially the local councils with which Green local committees would need to co-operate before eventually replacing them. But right now, and as things are, such a programme as I have very lightly sketched would make available a route out of comforting ineffectuality for those actual or potential members interested in *serious* politics – a chance to move on to the real work of building a shadow infrastructure for a society that will (as we now know, inevitably) have been forced back towards living within ecological limits.

There remains the transnational dimension of Green politics, action in which will be both complementary to, and as necessary as, vigorous localisation for responding to climate disaster in a way that gives us a chance of averting catastrophe. This principally means the transformation, or if that proves impossible the subversion and sabotage, of global capitalism. That is not something which Greens in any single country can hope to achieve, but it is a process which they can certainly contribute to helping along. As Wolfgang Streeck has argued, drawing on the work of Karl Polanyi, it is not just the commodification of the natural world which capitalism, lacking a convincing historical opponent since the 1980s, has now pushed beyond its limits. Its similarly overweening attempts to complete the commodification of labour and money have now resulted in deep systemic instability: increasingly precarious employment and junk financialisation undermine its remaining perceived legitimacy worldwide.⁶ Consequently, its long-term balancing act of keeping the rich secure, the poor placated, political interference bought off and ‘democratic’ appearances broadly preserved, is rapidly becoming impossible to maintain. This in turn has prompted a revival, especially among the international young, of a kind of left opposition until recently supposed to be dead and buried, and in some places, such as Britain, this is now seriously challenging for power. Greens clearly need to do all they can to further this worldwide reaction against a corrupt, moribund and yet still lethally destructive economic system.

That too, however, will involve hard choices and require focus and discipline. The programme of the British Labour Party, however unfettered by the now rusting shackles of neoliberalism, is still firmly caught in the old, disastrous paradigm of economic growth and material ‘progress’; but there is equally no doubt that helping to install a government under Corbyn would be bringing the most powerful leverage locally available to bear on the dislodgement of capitalism’s global hegemony, in which Britain remains even yet a significant player. So, while we still have to contend with first-past-the-post, shouldn’t Greens be leaving Labour a clear run in Parliamentary seats where the Green vote might tip the balance? – not merely in the spirit of befriending my enemy’s enemy, but in recognition that the climate threat is now so great as to warrant *any* tactical compromise which might contribute to bringing a deadly system down. The Green Party was beginning to have this discussion before the 2017 election, but characteristically (and lacking, indeed, the structure

⁶ Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?* (London: Verso, 2016) – see e.g. pp.248-9.

to do otherwise) left decisions to local branches. Facing up to climate reality now seems to demand a much more coordinated and rigorous approach.

If greens are seeking a political model for a Green Party adequate to the times, in other words, they should be picturing themselves no longer as the thinking person's Liberal Democrats, but as something much more like the Bolsheviks – especially, the Bolsheviks in their mode of interaction with the local *soviets* (Russian for *councils*) of workers' deputies which emerged spontaneously after the abortive 1905 revolution. I don't choose that comparison merely for its shock value. What enabled the Bolsheviks to capture the Russian state in 1917 – apart, of course, from their unrivalled discipline and firmness of purpose – was, in very large measure, the driving force of Lenin's absolute conviction that Marxism was a genuine science, according to which the inevitability of proletarian power was just *how things were*, a matter of historical determination which the October Revolution (“All power to the Soviets!”) offered the swiftest way to realise. That coup turned quickly to terror and unwarranted tyranny because, of course, Marxism was actually just a pseudo-science, and the supposedly inevitable dictatorship of the proletariat rapidly became the dictatorship of power-hungry personalities. But the Green claim to reshape society and create a successor ecological state is based on the near-unanimity of *genuine* science to the effect that oncoming climate chaos is as good as inevitable, and on offering the only plan for organising our societies and economies which even begins to face up to that reality.

The Bolsheviks thought that they knew how things really were, and this inspired them to change the world dramatically in fairly short order. Greens are both worse and better placed. We have the historical responsibility to transform the world almost out of recognition in very short order indeed – but we really *do* know how things are. Shouldn't we now have the courage of what we know, and at least a Bolshevik confidence in working out the consequences?

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