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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Political Dimension of Environmentalism

It is only since the 1970s that the environment has become a salient political issue, and only since the latter half of the 1980s that it became a mainstream one. As a consequence, the study of environmental politics has discarded its Cinderella status. Indeed, by the late 1980s, we seemed to be entering a new Green era, where environmental concern had become the height of fashion. In the developed world at least, opinion polls revealed mounting public concern for the state of the environment; consumers demanded environmentally friendly products and producers, with varying degrees of honesty, sought to provide them; recycling centres and bottle banks flourished. Since the late 1980s, the environment has slipped down the issue agenda a little, overtaken by dramatic political and economic events. It is now established, however, as a permanently important feature of political and academic discourse. Sovereign states are now locked into a supranational structure of institutions and processes, initially set in train by the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment convened in Stockholm in 1972 and built upon at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held at Rio 20 years later, and at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10) held in Johannesburg in 2002. These conferences, together with the series held in pursuit of a solution to climate change (see Chapter 6), guarantee the continued participation of nations in the search for acceptable solutions to environmental problems.

So, what is the stuff of environmental politics? An appropriate starting point is a definition. The common-sense definition of the term ‘environment’ – constituting our surroundings – would seem to be hopelessly broad, although it does reveal a sense of how all pervasive the subject is. In practice, we can impose a limitation by focusing on the ‘natural’ environment, so that environmental politics becomes a study of the human impact on the natural environment. Some prefer to use the label ‘Green politics’. ‘Green’ has been used since the 1950s to indicate concern for the environment and is now used in a blanket fashion by most casual observers. For others, the term ‘Green’ is associated with the radical ideas and policies of Green political parties, to be distinguished from the more moderate and reformist character of many environmental organizations (see below).

To understand the *politics* of the environment, some knowledge of environmental problems is necessary, but in order to distinguish between the scientific and social-scientific study of the environment, we must go

further than this. We must also seek to explain why it is that the environment has become a political issue, what are its distinguishing characteristics, what impact political decisions have had on the environment, why some decisions were taken rather than others and what political structures are best able to protect the environment? It is these themes that this book is concerned.

The role of environmental degradation

The obvious answer to the first of these questions is that the environment has become an important political issue because of the deleterious effects of human activity on the planet. Chapter 2 seeks to outline the nature and consequences of this activity. Information on environmental degradation is readily available, and one would be forgiven for concluding that the rise of the environment as an important political issue is related to lay observations and scientific evidence concerning ‘invisible’ phenomena such as climate change and ozone depletion. Indeed, one factor which ostensibly distinguishes the environment from many other issues is the extent of objective measurement involved. Thus, there is a crucially important technical core to the study of the environment, providing a key role for engineers, scientists and technicians (Weale, 1992: 10). Put simply, if there is a hole in the ozone layer or a build-up of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, and this threatens the stability of the global environment, then we need to do something about it. And if something needs to be done, then we need to decide what is causing it and do something about preventing it.

The growing sense of an objective environmental crisis, therefore, is an obvious reason for heightened concern. One can point here to the well-publicized environmental disasters of the past 40 years or so – the mercury poisoning at Minamata Bay in Japan in 1959; the slag heap slip at Aberfan in Wales which buried a school, with great loss of life, in 1966; the oil pollution caused by the stricken tankers *Torrey Canyon* (in 1967) and *Exxon Valdez* (in 1988) and the major oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010; industrial accidents at Bhopal in India, which killed over 3000 people and injured many hundreds of thousands, and at Seveso in Italy; the near-thing at the Three Mile Island nuclear facility in the United States in the late 1970s and the real-thing at Chernobyl in the 1980s – to name but a few. One can point, too, to important books, conferences and scientific research – Rachel Carson’s best-selling *Silent Spring* (1962) which documented the effects on the countryside of pesticide use; the first pictures of the Earth taken from space in 1967 which emphasized the fragile and insignificant nature of the planet and its occupants; the *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows et al., 1972); the previously mentioned Stockholm conference (proceedings published as Ward and Dubos, 1972) and the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Finally, since the 1980s, these problems have been submerged by the emergence of genuinely global issues such as climate change and ozone depletion.

This objective evidence not only indicates that environmental problems have increased quantitatively, in the sense that the number of environmentally damaging incidents has risen markedly, but that there has also been a qualitative shift. Environmental problems are no longer perceived merely as localized concerns affecting relatively few people and having few long-term consequences. Instead, the central concern has become nothing less than human survival on a planet which, it is now recognized, cannot continue indefinitely to cope with the consumption of non-renewable resources or the absorption of waste products from industrial processes at the levels which it is presently asked to do. The following information, provided in the early 1990s, tells its own story:

Since 1900, the world's population has multiplied more than three times. Its economy has grown twentyfold. The consumption of fossil fuels has grown by a factor of 30, and industrial production by a factor of 50. Most of that growth, about four-fifths of it, occurred since 1950. Much of it is unsustainable.

(MacNeil et al., 1991: 3)

Since then, the situation has deteriorated further. Between 2000 and 2009, for instance, the world's population grew from just over 6.1 billion to about 6.9 billion, and it is expected to rise to about 9.3 billion by 2050. Putting this into context, as recently as 1830 the population was only 1 billion (Barry, 2005: 256).

Of course, as Young (1993: 4) points out, environmental problems do manifest themselves at the local level, but 'what appear to be little local difficulties are the visible parts of much more complicated sets of inter-related problems', with regional, national and international aspects. Thus, for many people, the increasing volume of traffic and the building of more roads to meet rising demand causes readily visible congestion and damage to the countryside. It also, though, causes less visible health problems and, even further removed, it contributes to acid rain, increases the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere, thereby adding to the threat of global warming and, last but not the least, uses up more of the world's precious oil reserves (Young, 1993: 5–6).

These observations lead us to identify two features which distinguish environmentalism from many other issues. In the first place, present practices will have long-term consequences affecting the fundamental interests of future generations. This, of course, raises practical questions about the representation of future generations in our decision-making arenas as well as philosophical questions concerning inter- and intra-generational justice, issues tackled in Chapter 5 (Weale, 1992: 8–9).

The second feature is the increasingly international character of environmental decision-making. Co-operation between states to achieve environmental objectives has a long history, but two post-war developments

have markedly intensified the shift in focus. First, the identification of global environmental problems has not only increased the urgency for nations to act in concert because they are potentially so serious but it has also been recognized that they are problems that can *only* be dealt with by global co-operation. As List and Rittberger (1992: 108) point out: 'Ecological policy, like charity, begins at home, but, unlike the latter, stopping there is often immediately self-defeating'. Put simply, all countries stand to suffer, to varying degrees, from the consequences of global warming but it is of little use for one country, or a handful of countries, to act by controlling CO₂ emissions if other countries (and particularly the United States and China, the largest emitters of fossil fuels) do not follow suit. Second, there is the related issue of development since one, if not *the*, main threat to the environment is the rapid industrialization of developing countries eager to replicate the material quality of life in the developed world.

This book recognizes the increasingly supranational character of environmentalism. The global nature of environmental problems is identified in Chapter 2, Chapter 5 considers questions of global justice, and Chapters 6 and 7 describe the actors and regimes in international environmental politics and examine various approaches which try to explain the character of international co-operation for environmental purposes. In addition, the increasingly global nature of the environmental movement is emphasized in Chapter 9. Of course, the main actors in global environmental politics remain sovereign states, and therefore Chapter 8 is devoted to an examination of their role in environmental politics. The focus in this book is on environmental politics in affluent Western liberal democracies but reference, albeit relatively brief, is also made to environmental politics in those regimes that are not liberal democracies and are not affluent. This contrast is crucial because there is an assumption that the economic and political character of a regime will help to determine the nature of environmental policy-making and the role and influence of different political actors.

Despite the obvious relevance of environmental degradation, we should not over-exaggerate its importance as an explanation for the existence of a *politics* of the environment. These objectively defined problems can, of course, be distinguished from a subjective awareness of, and concern for, such problems so that the existence of the former does not necessarily by itself explain why the environment has become an important issue. This is one reason why the social sciences can make an important contribution to the environmental debate, and why it is not merely the preserve of scientists, technocrats or even philosophers, important though their contributions might be (Yearley, 1992: 49, 184–5). This recognition explains why there has been a tendency for environmental science degree courses to be re-defined as environmental studies (Young, 1990: 91).

At one extreme, it has even been suggested that the objective conditions are not at all important in explaining the rise of a social problem such as the environment (Kitsuse and Spector, 1981). As Chapter 2 illustrates, some

of the standard explanations for the rising popularity of environmental protection – based on an affluence-induced post-material culture and a post-war occupational shift – do come close to denying the social importance of the increasing severity of environmental problems. While we should obviously not ignore completely the explanatory capacity of objective environmental problems, the opposite extreme – that there is a simple relationship between identifying environmental problems, providing remedies for them and the generation of widespread popular support for their implementation – is equally simplistic.

For one thing, many environmental problems are not directly observable (although their effects might be) or, as in the case of natural resource depletion, not easy to visualize. Such problems are mediated through scientists, whose conclusions are rarely universally accepted within the scientific community, the media and pressure groups. In addition, even though most people have indirect experience of environmental problems and disasters, many of them still remain distant affairs with few immediate effects. For example, even though we were told that the Chernobyl nuclear accident affected us – in terms of an increased incidence of cancer – the effects remain imperceptible and we can comfort ourselves with the somewhat complacent thought – encouraged, rightly or wrongly, by nuclear scientists with a vested interest in the continuation of the industry – that our nuclear safety record is such that a similar accident could not happen here (the relationship between scientific evaluation of risk and the ‘real’ world inhabited by the general public is discussed by Beck, 1992). Likewise, we are told that this or that extreme weather event, or natural disaster, is a product of climate change but we have to take the word of experts for this, and there are other ‘experts’ who put a different view.

The political character of environmentalism

The fact that even when environmental problems are widely recognized it is not automatically followed by remedial action illustrates that there is a political dimension to environmentalism that mediates between the existence of environmental problems and the response of decision-makers. Convincing scientific evidence, particularly if backed up by clearly observed environmental deterioration, obviously makes a social problem claim more robust, adding credibility to campaigns mounted by environmentalists (Yearley, 1992: 75). Of equal, if not greater, importance, though, are the social, economic and political processes involved in placing the environment near the top of the political agenda.

To illustrate the political character of environmental issues, it is instructive to consider the issue of climate change. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize he was awarded in 2007, Al Gore made the claim that ‘the climate crisis is not a political issue, it is a moral and spiritual challenge to all of humanity’. He makes a similar point in his movie *An Inconvenient*

Truth. The reason why Al Gore does not see climate change as a political issue is because he thinks it is a ‘no-brainer’. In other words, he thinks that climate change will damage everyone’s interests because it will destroy the planet. It is therefore in everyone’s interests to do something about it and fast. In other words, there is no political decision to be made.

Clearly, if Gore is right – that climate change affects everyone equally and will ultimately result in catastrophic effects for us all – then he may have a case that there is not a politics of climate change in the sense that the existence of an objective environmental problem leads directly to action to resolve it. Of course, this has not been the case because climate change, as with other environmental issues, is as much concerned with competing values, ethics and interests as it is with objective facts. Thus, even if Gore is right, many of the catastrophic effects he – along with many others – thinks will inevitably follow inaction may not happen in the lifetime of anyone currently alive, and we may take the decision to continue exploiting the planet and pass on the costs to future generations. In other words, we will have to consider the competing interests of future generations in our decision-making.

Moreover, Gore’s assumption, that everyone now living is affected equally by climate change, is incorrect. The impact of climate change has differed, and will continue to differ, from state to state, and from community to community, and the costs of dealing with it are going to be similarly diverse. It is for this reason, of course, that climate change is a political issue. It is not now really a technical issue. Most, albeit not all, have accepted that the build-up of CO₂ – the main greenhouse gas – in the atmosphere is largely man-made, and the solutions to this are well known. Cut down on the amount of CO₂ emitted, adapt to the consequences of allowing it to continue, or find an effective way of capturing it. So, the reason why these solutions have not, so far, been effectively implemented is almost entirely down to the political character of the issue. To be more precise, it is because the effects of climate change impact upon people, groups, classes, nations and regions very differently. Some countries, regions and localities will be hit harder by the impact of climate change, some groups and classes are more able to deal with the consequences of climate change than others, and some will have to make greater sacrifices to act on climate change than others.

This goes to the heart of what politics is about, for politics is associated with adversarial behaviour precisely because it reflects the conflictual nature of society, or, to use a less value-laden definition, the fact that all societies of any complexity contain a range of different interests and values. Indeed, one popular definition of politics is that it is the process by which groups representing divergent interests and values make collective decisions, in the sense of those decisions that impact upon the groups involved. There are two assumptions here. The first is that all societies of any complexity must contain diversity, that humans will always have different interests and values, and therefore there will always be a need for a mechanism whereby these different interests and values are reconciled.

The second assumption is that scarcity is also an inevitable characteristic of all societies. Since there is not enough of the goods that people want to go around, there needs to be some mechanism whereby these goods can be distributed.

The importance of a *politics* of the environment is confirmed by the changing nature of the case put by environmentalists. In the 1970s, their case was structured by warnings of imminent catastrophe encouraging, as one stream of thought, a survivalist mentality where the objective imperatives – act now before it is too late – predominated (Hardin, 1968; Ehrlich, 1972; Goldsmith et al., 1972; Heilbroner, 1974; Meadows et al., 1972). More recently, however, radical Greens have put greater emphasis on the desirability, as opposed to the necessity, of change. Thus, a doom-and-gloom scenario has been discarded in favour of promoting a society which places a good quality environment above one which worships material consumption.

The advent of climate change has, to some degree, resulted in a return to a survivalist mentality among some. This is a pity in that one can see the advantage of emphasizing the desirability of a sustainable lifestyle. As Eckersley (1992: 17–21) points out, the Green case is driven above all by an ‘emancipatory’ ethos, since it is not just telling us that we have to give up our present material standard of living, leaving us to mourn our loss, but it is also telling us how our lives can be enriched by adopting a set of values and institutions which will make us happier and more fulfilled. This appeal to self-interest is coupled with an appeal to our altruistic nature since, as we shall see below, a central feature of the radical Green approach is an ethical case for discarding an anthropocentric approach to the natural environment in favour of an ecocentric one which recognizes the inherent value of nature.

To sum up, then, despite the recognition by governments throughout the world that environmental issues are politically important, progress towards effective international agreements has been slow. It is, of course, a flawed approach to explain these developments by reference to the attitudes of governmental actors alone, although such attitudes can play an important role in policy outcomes (Nordliner, 1981). Rather, environmental decision-making is, like other public policy issue areas, a complex matter involving a wide variety of actors, interests and considerations.

Pollution in general, for instance, does not raise insurmountable difficulties as a technical problem, but it enters the realm of politics precisely because it is not merely a technical problem, but one which causes conflict between competing interests – for instance, motorists, oil companies and road builders versus cyclists, pedestrians and wildlife and, at a supranational level, the developed versus the developing world – which decision-makers must seek to resolve. The way in which they do so will reflect the nature of power and representation in the political system, central concerns of the political scientist. The potential for conflict within environmental policy-making is particularly acute because environmental issues cross-cut

a huge variety of governmental activities – transport, agriculture, trade and so on – and these separate policy arenas tend to provide a great deal of influence for development-oriented interests. As we will see, a truly sustainable policy requires the integration of environmental policy to ensure that problems are not merely displaced (from air to water or from one government department to another or, indeed, from present to future generations) but are genuinely resolved (Dryzek, 1987: 10–13).

Approaches to environmentalism

Examining different approaches to environmentalism illustrates further that the environmental debate revolves around competing normative and empirical claims. To make sense of these competing claims or discourses (Dryzek, 2005: 8–13), it is useful to identify the constituent parts of reformist and radical perspectives (see Box 1.1). To avoid confusion, it should be pointed out that various terms have been utilized to distinguish these two positions. Dobson (2007) and Porritt (1984) refer to dark and light green approaches (only the former justifying the label ‘Green’); Young (1993) and Hayward (1995) prefer to use the terms ‘radical’ and ‘weak or reformist environmentalism’; Naess (1973) coined the terms

Box 1.1 Reformist and radical approaches to environmentalism

Reformist

1. Modified sustainable economic growth/ecological modernization
2. Large role for technological development as a provider of solutions for environmental problems
3. Environmental solutions can co-exist with existing social and political structures
4. Anthropocentrism and a commitment to intra- and inter-generational equity

Radical

1. Limits to, and undesirability of, economic growth
2. A distrust of scientific and technological fixes
3. Radical social and political change necessary: either authoritarian (for ‘survivalists’) or decentralized and democratic political organization
4. Intrinsic value of nature or, at least, a weaker version of anthropocentrism; a commitment to social justice within human society and between humans and non-human nature

‘deep ecology’ and ‘shallow ecology’; Eckersley (1992) distinguishes between ecocentric and anthropocentric approaches, while to add to the confusion, both O’Riordan (1976) and Pearce et al. (1993) distinguish between ecocentric and technocentric approaches.

The term ‘ecologism’ is preferred by some radicals because it signifies the interrelationship between the human species and nature, and implies a non-hierarchical order of things displacing man from his dominant position, both key characteristics of the radical approach. The use of the label ‘ecologism’, however, can lead to confusion since the term ‘ecology’ – first used by the scientist Ernst Haeckel in the 1850s – also describes a branch of biology which studies, in a neutral fashion, the relationship between living organisms and their environment (Heywood, 1992: 247).

The differences between the radical and reformist positions are more easily definable than the terminology would suggest. Each approach contains an economic, political and philosophical perspective. Put simply, the reformist position is human-centred, holding that protecting the environment is primarily for the benefit of humans. In addition, it suggests that environmental protection can be effectively incorporated within the political and economic structures of modern industrial society, without fundamentally threatening economic growth, material prosperity or liberal democracy.

For the reformists, then, economic growth and environmental protection are not necessarily incompatible objectives. Economic development must be sustainable; it must, in the words of one well-known definition, be ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 43). One way of defining environmental reformism is to describe it as the politics of catalytic converters, power-station scrubbers and bottle banks. It is therefore an optimistic approach, putting faith in the ability of science and technology to solve environmental problems without fundamentally challenging our institutional and value systems.

Many would regard this as the totality of what is involved in being Green or environmentally aware, but from the radical perspective at the other end of the spectrum much more is required. Indeed, for radical Greens, fundamental economic, social and political change – nothing less, that is, than the creation of a new kind of society with different institutions and values – is required both to deal with the severity of the crisis and to enable humans to live more satisfying and fulfilling lives and to provide nature in general with the respect it deserves. From this perspective, the reformist’s tinkering with the structures of modern industrial society – providing a few palliatives to mitigate the worst effects of industrial society – is not enough to forestall environmental catastrophe and represents an inadequate and ‘shallow’ response to the environmental crisis.

A number of general points can be made about the approaches sketched above. In the first place, it is not being claimed here that this is the only, or even the most adequate, typology available. Barry (1994, 1999), among

others, for instance, regards the polarization endemic in the division between radical and reformist as unhelpful, not least because it tends to belittle, or direct attention away from, the important task of developing a theoretical perspective which can help us to understand the nature of environmental politics in the present, thus enabling us to chart a course which recognizes the many obstacles standing in front of sustainable development. Dryzek (2005) provides a more complex typology which helps to counter Barry's objection. By distinguishing between 'prosaic' and 'imaginative' discourses, Dryzek offers us the possibility of preferring the much more sophisticated 'sustainability' model which, while remaining reformist, confronts directly some of the main radical objections to a more simplistic or 'prosaic' reformism.

The second general point is that the distinction between reformism and radicalism is over-simplistic, an inevitable and necessary feature of all typologies. In particular, it is possible to hold positions in both camps. An acceptance of the limits to growth thesis, for instance, does not preclude one from espousing an anthropocentric ethic. Similarly, there is nothing in principle incompatible with holding a belief in radical social and political change while at the same time accepting the role of technological innovation. Third, the typology is incomplete. Even the reformist approach recognizes that there is an environmental 'problem' requiring action. Both the radical and reformist approaches are challenged by a so-called Promethean or cornucopian approach which denies the existence of acute environmental problems and has 'unlimited confidence in the ability of humans and their technologies to overcome any problems – including environmental problems' (Dryzek, 2005: 51). This discourse, although the dominant mode of thinking about the human relationship with the natural environment in the last century and for much of this, was, as Chapter 3 reveals, articulated as never before in response to the challenge it faced from environmentalists in the 1970s. Since then its fortunes have waxed and waned primarily according to the state of the economy (*ibid.*: 51–71).

A great deal of attention in this book will be devoted to the reformist part of the spectrum, since this is the context of the 'real' world in which governmental responses to environmental problems are located and in which environmental groups must operate. No book on environmental issues, and still less one which focuses on environmental *politics*, though, can ignore the radical challenge to environmental reformism. This is in part because of its empirical claim that environmental catastrophe faces us unless we take radical steps to limit production and consumption levels. Equally, the radical approach offers a challenge to Western political thought since its claim is nothing less than that the Green approach to politics represents an entirely comprehensive and distinctive ideology, justifying a separate political party whose role is to articulate a programme of policies based on it. As a consequence, Chapters 3 and 4 consider the radical case in some detail, and it can be taken into account in an assessment of environmental decisions taken, considered particularly in Chapters 6–8.

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