



WAKE UP CALL FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT?

My parents were “green” and “organic” well before anyone knew what these terms really meant. They were founder members of the *Irish Organic Movement* and the *Cork Environmental Alliance*, they played an active role in campaigns against chemical companies and incineration, my mother was a committee member of the local branch of *An Taisce*, my father planted trees all over our small farm. Admittedly there were some anomalies - we had a dump in a disused quarry on our land and Dad serviced cigarette vending machines - both of which paid our way through college.....

Nevertheless, my sister and I were raised on organic vegetables and environmental rhetoric, and in turn, we are both doing the same to our kids - it’s a cultural thing, a bit like politics or religion. When my father was dying in the wonderful Marymount Hospice in Cork in late 2011, he was visited by a gentle counsellor, and asked if he would like some spiritual support - “No thank you, I’m an environmentalist,” was the reply.

Here in Ireland, our fledgling environmental movement emerged in the 1970s, spurred on by the scramble to catch up with the economic development of our European neighbours, a lax system of planning, a culture of clientalism and corporatism, and concerns about pollution. Initially, this took the form of small local groups objecting to the siting of chemical/industrial plants, or other intrusive development, in their area. National campaigns then began to emerge around issues such as nuclear arms and nuclear energy, habitat and wildlife conservation, waste, incineration, genetic engineering and climate change.

Over the years, both in Ireland and elsewhere, the environmental movement has played a critical role in highlighting potential threats. As Frank McDonald¹ states: “*It is quite remarkable how few early warnings about risks to human health or the environment over the years turned out to be unfounded. Whether the dangers came from X-rays, DDT, tobacco smoking, asbestos, lead in petrol or chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), early warners were proved right, often after decades of denial by vested interests.*”

Jeffrey Sachs² says that “*no part of the modern world has played as constructive a role in the challenges of poverty, disease, hunger, and the environment as the NGO sector. The scope of NGO activity, if defined broadly, is absolutely immense.*” And environmental groups throughout Ireland have played and continue to play a vital role in ensuring stricter regulation and monitoring of processes and emissions, and the implementation of relevant EU Directives. They also serve a key function in alerting politicians and the public to potential and existing problems, acting as both a watchdog and an advocate for cleaner, greener, more sustainable policy decisions.

¹ *Irish Times* 8th April; 2009

² *J. Sachs (2008) Common Wealth; p. 324/5*

However, local environmental protests in Ireland have sometimes caused the polarisation of communities - those "for" and "against", and have often been unsuccessful in stopping proposed developments. And the movement as a whole has failed to win over the trade unions or any part of the organised labour movement. It is often at loggerheads with the farming lobby and is still largely seen as serving the needs of the middle classes. National campaigns and organisations continue to find it difficult to raise funding and to increase their membership base. A sizeable proportion of Irish people see the environmental movement as pushing anti-capitalist, anti-big business, anti-development agendas. Many think we're against progress. And let's face it, we're not exactly flavour of the month as people try to ride the recession.

Environmentalism is a broad church, made up of individuals of varying shades of green.

We range from deep ecologists who believe that nature is sacred, to the pragmatists who want existing institutions to become more sustainable. We have differing degrees of unease about involvement in the political system, the power of corporations, the notion of economic growth, and the promotion of consumer lifestyles. Most of us are a tad radical, whether overtly or covertly. And some of us are not so sure about technology, preferring more home-spun, resilient approaches. What we do have in common, though, is a real concern about the future of our world. And we have a continuing and important role to play in lobbying governments and calling them to account, in highlighting scientific developments, in bringing new ideas to the table and in bearing witness to situations as they evolve.

But when it comes to global warming and behaviour change, are we having much effect? Worse still, are we hogging the issue?

Is it time for a bit of collective soul-searching?

THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

In 2004, two American environmental strategists, Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, caused controversy when they wrote an essay called *The Death of Environmentalism*. They argued that the politics that dealt with acid rain and smog can't deal with climate change, and that environmentalism must die so that something new can be born. In 2007, they followed this with a book titled *Break Through*, which they say delivers on their promise to articulate a new politics for a new century, one focused not on complaints and ecological limits but on aspirations and human possibility - the "politics of possibility" as opposed to the "politics of limits". They say that the way to get insecure Americans to embrace an expansive, generous, and progressive politics is not to tell them they are weak, but rather to point out all the ways in which they are strong.

Central to their argument is that the last two decades have shown that the environmental agenda has failed to be particularly powerful politically. In 2003, the authors conducted a poll of voters in Pennsylvania³ - one of the battleground states that determine who is elected President - and asked the open-ended question "What is the most important concern facing your community?" Just 2% named the environment. Not a single person named global warming.

According to Nordhaus and Shellenberger, most environmentalists are rationalistic. Like other liberals, they tend to believe that they have arrived at their values and worldview through a rational and controlled process. "In the stories they tell about their movement's birth and in the politics they make for its future, environmental leaders steadfastly ignore the central role that evolving values play in shaping society and politics." And no single word better describes the ethics of environmentalism than sacrifice.

³ T. Nordhaus & M Shellenberger (2007) *Break Through*; p.33

They say that environmentalism is not the solution to the crisis of global warming. Instead, that the crisis is driving environmentalism to evolve into something else, which proposes a vision of human power, growth and development. Overcoming global warming, *“demands unleashing human power, creating a new economy, and remaking nature as we prepare for the future. And to accomplish all of that, the right models come not from raw sewage, acid rain, or the ozone hole, but instead from the very thing environmentalists have long imagined to be the driver of pollution in the first place: economic development.”*⁴

*“We may achieve some greenhouse gas emission reductions by lowering our overall consumption, but the largest reductions will come from energy efficiency and shifting to cleaner energy sources - strategies that don’t require drastic changes in the way we live our lives. What’s needed, in short, is not so much less as different consumption.”*⁵

*“A new politics requires a new mood, one appropriate for the world we hope to create. It should be a mood of gratitude, joy and pride, not sadness, fear and regret. A politics of overcoming will trigger feelings of joy rather than sadness, control rather than fatalism, and gratitude rather than resentment. If we are grateful to be alive, then we must also be grateful that our ancestors overcame. It is thanks to them, and the world they made, that we live.”*⁶

Jonathon Porritt⁷ echoes the theme; *“I would argue that we can now talk with some justification of the demise of conventional environmentalism in the face of 20 years of unreconstructed, neo-conservative economic liberalisation.”* The appeal of environmentalism is *“too narrow, too technical, too anti-business, too depressing, often too dowdy, and too “heard it all before”*”. Unless environmentalism can reposition itself within the more progressive and radical frame that sustainable development provides - a frame that allows the inevitable (the need for change) to be made desirable - then a continuing decline in influence seems the most likely outcome.

In the report *Painting the Town Green*, Stephen Hounsham⁸ asks: *“If the green movement has not succeeded in selling the environment beyond a specific sector of society, where have we gone wrong?”*

He makes the following points:

1 The common response of environmentalists to the over-use of resources has been to preach a more frugal lifestyle, but even a top salesman couldn’t really sell sacrifice, other than perhaps to people like ourselves for whom sacrifice provides some degree of satisfaction, comfort even. Less is hardly ever seen as more and directly or indirectly trying to sell a green lifestyle as giving up everything nice and living in a cave with the light switched off is doomed to fail.

2 The green movement has also busied itself pumping out information, assuming that information on its own leads to awareness of threats and problems, concern and finally action. But it rarely does. Unfortunately, most if not all the lifestyle decisions that we seek to influence are not determined mainly by rational consideration of the facts, but by emotions, habits, personal preferences, fashions, social norms, personal morals and values, peer pressure and other intangibles.

3 And we, the “ethical seekers” who comprise most of the membership of campaigning organisations, make the classic mistake of conceiving and expressing messages in our own terms, and then aiming them at the wider public. We tend to assume everyone is like us, with the same thirst for scary details of environmental threats, the same triggers for concern, and the same compelling urge to do something about it before we go to bed at night. Yet, the propositions don’t make sense to these audiences and they often fail. Our campaigns and public education programmes usually assume one size fits all and they don’t recognise that people are different with different triggers - *“too many materials end up being written by green people, very often about green people and therefore inevitably for green people.”*

⁴ T Nordhaus & M Schellenberger (2007) *Break Through*; p. 113

⁵ *Ibid*; p. 126

⁶ *Ibid*; p. 153

⁷ J Porritt (2007) *Capitalism as if the World Matters*; p. 51

⁸ S Hounsham (2006) *Painting the Town Green - how to persuade people to buy environmentally friendly*; p. 5

CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE

"I don't give a f - - k about the environment" - response from a member of the public when asked about his attitude to climate change.

If environmentalists and The Green Party seem to be the only people who are vocal about the issues of climate change and energy security, how is this interpreted by the wider public? Does this make it easy for the message to be simply dismissed as the "Green agenda"? And do people just assume that the problems are only to do with "the environment" and not anything to do with themselves?

As Nordhaus and Shellenberger put it, *"why is a human-made phenomenon like global warming – which may kill hundreds of millions of human beings over the next century - considered "environmental"? Why are poverty and war not considered environmental problems while global warming is? What are the implications of framing global warming as an environmental problem and handing off the responsibility for dealing with it to environmentalists?"*

Anthony Giddens⁹ says that there are big problems with the fact that "going green" has become more or less synonymous with efforts to limit climate change. According to him, the green movement has its origins in the hostile emotions that industrialism aroused among the early conservationists. And then, in the 1970's and 80's the greens defined themselves in opposition to orthodox politics. Just what is, and what is not, valuable in green political thinking has to be sorted out. It isn't possible to endorse any approach which tries in some sense to "return to nature". *"Conservation may be a defensible value, but it has nothing intrinsically to do with combating global warming, and it may even hamper efforts."*

Giddens acknowledges that NGOs are not only pressure groups, but also play a significant role in co-ordinating scientific information and bringing it to the notice of decision-makers and the public. For instance, the two workshops set up in the late 1980s which led to the emergence of the IPCC were organised by NGOs. NGOs continue to be closely involved in the setting up of climate change policy in many countries, including Ireland, where they are trying to prompt governments to act, and are pushing for these actions to be far-reaching.

However, he states that *"we must create a positive model of a low-carbon future - and, moreover, one that connects with ordinary, everyday life in the present."* There is no such model at the moment and we have to work towards it. *"It won't be a green vision, but one driven by political, social and economic thinking. It can't be a utopia, but utopian strands will be involved, since they supply ideals to be striven for. A mixture of the idealistic and the hard-headed is required..... The prize is huge. There is another world waiting for us out there if we can find our way to it. It is one where not only climate change has been held at bay, but where oil has lost its capacity to determine the shape of world politics."*¹⁰

⁹ A Giddens (2009); *The Politics of Climate Change*; p. 6

¹⁰ *Ibid*; p. 11/12

