

# Vote Blue, Get Green Conservatism: Kieron O'Hara Charts an Apparent Political Paradox

**Kieron O'Hara**

*Intelligence, Agents, Multimedia Group  
School of Electronics and Computer Science  
University of Southampton  
Highfield  
Southampton SO17 1BJ  
United Kingdom  
kmo@ecs.soton.ac.uk*

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“Vote blue, go green” was one of the more notable political slogans of recent years. First used for the Conservative Party’s local election campaign in 2006, it suggested – very much against everyone’s intuitive assumptions – that a vote for the Conservatives would be an effective way of electing representatives that would protect the environment.

As a piece of political marketing, it was a masterstroke. At the time, the Conservative Party was perceived as very right wing and alienated from the electorate, it had lost three consecutive General Elections, and new leader David Cameron was determined to drag it back to the political centre where it could more effectively combat the formidable votewinning machine that was Tony Blair’s New Labour. Labour had not developed its environmental credentials very strongly, and so here was an area where the Conservatives could position themselves to be more in touch with young, urban professionals (a key target demographic group which Blair had previously sewn up). Furthermore, going green had a deep symbolic value for the blues’ public image, showing that the party really had embraced change.

The Conservatives had not always had such a bad rep on the environment, and indeed at many times in their history had been the greenest of the leading parties. In the nineteenth century the Conservatives were the country party, pursuing the interests of landowners against the Liberals, whose free trade policies were supported most strongly in the polluting manufacturing towns (neither, it is fair to say, bothered much about the ordinary labourer). While prominent Liberals such as Richard Cobden (1804-65) and John Bright (1811-89) were developing the so-called ‘Manchester School’ of free trade, a group of aristocratic Tories centred around Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81) formed ‘Young England’, with a romantic, traditionalist vision of a hierarchical, rural idyll, expressed in Disraeli’s novels *Coningsby*, *Sybil* and *Tancred*. Though Young England never achieved any political power in its own right, it was an early and influential critique of the social and environmental degradation that unregulated industry could wreak.

Nineteenth century ruralism failed, despite Disraeli’s later becoming Prime Minister (Feb-Dec 1868, 1874-80). By then this most shrewd of politicians had moved on from his earlier position, having noted that rural interests were electorally far outweighed by the growing urban masses, and that a strictly rural party was doomed to perpetual

opposition. When the Liberal Party split over the issue of whether Ireland (then a British colony) should be allowed to rule itself in 1886, the Conservatives gratefully allied themselves with disgruntled Liberal Unionists, a group led by the former Mayor of Birmingham Joseph Chamberlain. The urban votes these politicians brought with them diluted the country voice in the Conservative Party.

Since then the Conservative Party has struggled to balance its rural, environmentally sensitive interests with its essentially liberal advocacy of business, industry, growth and the free market. Each faction has had its periods of triumph; the twentieth century high point for the ruralists was the period of Stanley Baldwin's leadership (1923-37), during most of which time he was either Prime Minister or a key figure in coalition governments. Labour, as the party of the working man and woman, had often been the champion of heavy manufacturing industry.

But Baldwinism also failed – Baldwin had hoped to appease the growing military ambitions of Hitler's Germany, and the Conservatives, although revitalised by the wartime leadership of Sir Winston Churchill, became perceived as the party of the out-of-touch squirearchy. Labour won an enormous victory in the dramatic election of 1945. When the Conservatives had regrouped, they jettisoned much of their past baggage, and the politicians elected in 1950 and 1951, though largely centrist, were also highly influenced by the free market philosophy of Friedrich Hayek whose *The Road to Serfdom*, a critique of welfare states and government intervention in the economy, had appeared in 1944.

Free market philosophy gradually gained hold while the modernising tendencies of the postwar era made concern for the environment appear quaint and romantic. By the time of the Thatcher government (1979-90), greenery was – at least in rhetoric – far from a priority. Nigel Lawson, Mrs Thatcher's Energy Secretary from 1981-3, argued against the consensus of the time that an energy policy was even needed at all.

We will do far better to concentrate our efforts on improving the efficiency with which energy is supplied and used, an objective that will remain valid and important whatever the future may bring. This means ... that public sector energy investment decisions should in general be based not on a simple-minded attempt to match projected UK demand and supply but rather, as in the private sector, on whether the investment is likely to offer a good return on capital. (From a speech in 1982, quoted in his memoirs *The View From No.11*)

The nadir of the Conservatives' relationship with the environmental movement was the appointment of Nicholas Ridley, a controversial, buccaneering, chain-smoking Thatcher loyalist, as Environment Secretary, who among other things hoped to expand home ownership by promoting building on greenbelt land.

As often with political caricatures, however, the reality was somewhat mixed. The rural cohorts of the Conservative Party remained vocal during the Thatcher government, which often found itself holding the ring between agribusiness and more conservation-minded Tories. Although land use regulation was relaxed, opening the way to rural development, there were a number of victories for the environmentalists. Furthermore, the government was assiduous in implementing the large number of environmental directives coming from the European Community. Indeed, the Thatcher government took a lead in arguing for the Montreal Protocol which restricted uses of CFCs which had been shown to damage the ozone layer. Thatcher herself had addressed the World Climate Conference on the topic, and had also

argued, in a speech at the Royal Society in 1988, for more scientific study of climate change and its effects.

Although John Major often consciously aped Baldwin's homely style and nostalgia for a cosy view of English rural life (and although his Chancellor Kenneth Clarke had made a point of increasing petrol duties), after the election defeat in 1997 green thinking disappeared entirely. William Hague's high point in the polls came in 2000 with his championing of the petrol protests by car owners enraged at the high cost of fuel (caused partly by Clarke's measures). Iain Duncan Smith was more sympathetic, for example having an interest in solar power, but never developed an overarching policy. Michael Howard was uninterested. Even the legendary paper by Party Treasurer Michael Ashcroft, *Wake Up and Smell the Coffee*, which pointed out in no uncertain terms how despised the Tories were in 2005, made no mention of green issues.

It was against this background that David Cameron tried to reassert the Tories' green credentials. In 2006, as well as coining the "Vote Blue, Go Green" slogan, he made a well-publicised visit to the Svalbard glacier in Spitzbergen, made a speech to the Google *Zeitgeist* conference promoting 'General Well-Being' over 'Gross Domestic Product', and unveiled a controversial new logo for the party, a stylised oak tree. *Built to Last*, a statement of the aims and objectives of Cameron's Conservatives, included the following as aim#3.

To meet the great environmental threats of the age, to enhance the environment and to increase general well-being. We believe that there is more to life than money; that the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our relationships and the sustainability of our environment are central in building a strong and just society.

Green ideas continued to colour the Conservatives' policy development, the first stage of which involved setting up various groups (reaching out beyond the party) to investigate policy options in a number of areas. The Quality of Life policy group was chaired jointly by John Gummer, one of Thatcher's and Major's cabinet ministers with a long-standing interest in the environment, and Zac Goldsmith, an activist who was then editor of *The Ecologist* magazine (and ironically the son of James Goldsmith, a billionaire who strongly opposed Major's government), and produced a massive report in 2007, whose calls for green taxes proved very controversial on the Conservative backbenches.

When official policies began to emerge from the Conservatives' policy-making process (chaired by Oliver Letwin), they tended to be much more technocratic, focusing on technological fixes to environmental problems, such as smart grids and smart meters to ensure more efficient use of electricity, rather than punitive measures to raise energy prices. An energy policy paper *Power to the People* appeared in 2007, followed by a green paper *The Low Carbon Economy* in 2009. Both documents, also controversial despite being very watered-down compared to the Goldsmith-Gummer report, contained many talismanic references to Margaret Thatcher and 18<sup>th</sup> century theorist of the free market Adam Smith (as if to take the curse away).

The reaction against Cameron-inspired greenery was not long in coming. Some critics, such as Peter Lilley, have focused their ire on Labour's Climate Change Act 2008, while others such as Tim Montgomerie of the conservativehome blog or *Daily Telegraph* columnist Simon Heffer have been more openly critical of the Tory

leadership. But the main attack has come from Nigel Lawson, whose *An Appeal to Reason* applies cold logic to the case for mitigating climate change, and finds it lacking. He argues that given the uncertainty of the science, the unlikelihood of international agreements including the United States, China and India (the three likely main contributors to global warming in the coming decades), and the huge costs of serious mitigation measures (such as dramatically decreasing our generation of carbon dioxide and methane), it is far more sensible to focus on measures to adapt to global warming, such as better flood defences for coastal cities and freeing up markets for food in order to ensure more efficient supply. Lawson finds nothing wrong with a carbon tax, but would prefer that it was revenue-neutral (i.e. the gains from the tax to be offset by cuts in other taxes). A tax would at least allow economists to discover the financial levels at which consumer behaviour might change, and is much preferable to the cap-and-trade systems which have been so abused in the EU. He also ridicules the inconsistency of politicians who wish to lower consumption of carbon-based fuels, but who also complained loudly about high oil prices in 2007 and early 2008.

Yet the real difference between conservatives and environmentalists is quite often a matter of their very distinct temperaments. As a matter of fact, the distance in philosophical theory between green and blue isn't far, and what seems to count more is that Conservatives see greens as beardie weirdies who would force us all to live in communes, while greens see Conservatives as stuck-up uptight suits who care only for money. Of course, each of these perceptions is a caricature.

The Conservative tradition, dating from Edmund Burke (1729-97), has long seen the continuity of ways of life and institutions as key to the preservation of trust, community and social stability, and conservation is an important part of that continuity. Even liberal free market philosophy can engage with green thought. The price mechanism in free markets ensures that scarce goods, such as oil, increase in price, which simultaneously decreases their use and makes alternatives relatively cheaper. Free markets also foster the technological innovation that may help offset climate change or environmental degradation, if the rewards can be gathered by entrepreneurs. Furthermore, liberal economics provides the intellectual machinery for cost-benefit analyses to be performed; in this spirit, Bjørn Lomborg's 'Copenhagen Consensus', which has been heavily criticised by greens and scientists, nevertheless suggests that money might be better spent, to achieve the outcome of better health and welfare of the poor, on 'quick wins' such as providing clean water or combating unfashionable diseases such as malaria or tuberculosis. Prominent right-wing thinkers who have pursued a green agenda include Newt Gingrich, Roger Scruton and John Gray.

Questions still remain about Cameron's green conservatism. Adopting a green position was undoubtedly a clever piece of political marketing – but was it any more than that? Cameron has certainly tried to pursue a post-Thatcher conservative agenda, moving away from the stern free market philosophy that characterised Thatcherism, looking at well-being rather than prosperity, promoting corporate social responsibility and wanting to transfer power down to local communities.

Much of Conservative rhetoric about green policies is resolutely optimistic, from their explicit association with energy security to the upbeat assessment of the effects that greening the economy will have on job creation, skill levels and international competitiveness. However, is this realistic? Much of the problem in traditional carbon-based economies is to do with growth and consumerism whose eradication

would tend to lower prosperity, while many would suspect that though a green economy would create “hundreds of thousands” of new jobs, it might also have a negative effect on jobs in sectors such as manufacturing and transport. Is the optimistic rhetoric justified, or is it part of a ‘hard sell’?

There is no doubt that the current financial crisis is severe enough to knock green conservatism off course. If people are more worried about their jobs in a time of recession, they may not welcome experiments with restructuring the economy (and that goes for the global community as well, as international agreements seem essential). Furthermore, capital is scarce – it is hard for private firms to get credit, while the UK government is already borrowing record amounts – in which case it is difficult to see where the investment in new technology such as smart grids is going to come from. On the other hand, as the next government (of whichever party) will almost certainly have to consider raising taxes in order to reduce the budget deficit, maybe green taxes will be a more palatable method of doing that than increases in income tax or V.A.T.

The estrangement of greens and blues is something of an historical anomaly, an artefact of the Conservative Party’s drive to modernise after the Second World War, and of the influence of Friedrich Hayek. David Cameron, it might be argued, is really restoring a link that goes back a couple of centuries, while also cleverly occupying a piece of the political centre ground that has been neglected by Labour. How far Conservative policy will address climate change and environmental degradation is a moot point, and it is typically easier to discuss such matters in opposition than in government. As eminent sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued recently, democratic politics is not currently well-adapted to addressing urgent collective problems such as global warming.

Whether David Cameron can make a difference depends on many things. First of all, there is the small matter of winning the next general election. Secondly, will the financial crisis derail policy thinking out of left field? Third, will Cameron’s agenda to return power to the people result in *more* selfish behaviour? Fourth, how will contradictions be resolved (a wind farm may help the climate but ruin the countryside)? And fifth, will green conservatism be nullified by internal opposition within the Conservative Party?

Cameron has many battles to fight both within and without his party, but the reclamation of green conservatism already marks one of his most creative and individual contributions to the British political scene.

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