

## Chapter Nine: Green Conservatism

### Sample Chapter from Kieron O'Hara, *Conservatism* (Reaktion Books, 2011)

Small-c conservatism, understood as a philosophy of change and risk, clearly has a lot in common with its etymological relation 'conservationism'. Many conservative politicians such as Newt Gingrich and David Cameron, and philosophers, including Burke, Disraeli and Roger Scruton (as well as the protean outlier John Gray),<sup>1</sup> have powerfully described the environment as an important source of value whose degradation is a source of general loss and harm.

Temperamentally, environmentalists and conservatives are miles apart; while the Tory sups champagne at White's, the green enjoys nothing so much as creating a new type of compost. They move in different circles and have different enemies (often each other). Yet I shall argue in this chapter that, both philosophically and pragmatically, conservatism is the best-placed ideology for defending our environment. This is a deep topic worthy of many more words than I have space for here, but I hope it will serve as a taster for the possibilities of future conservative thinking.

In this chapter I will focus mainly on the issue of climate change, but I hope that a germ of an approach to unrelated environmental problems is visible in the discussion. We certainly should not forget that climate change is only one environmental issue. Some others can be addressed alongside it, as they have related causes (for example the acidification of the sea). Often issues are complementary, for example reducing the amount of waste produced by households and industry. There are many arguments about whether agriculture should be efficient or organic (for example there is at least some evidence that importing food from the developing world actually helps rather than hinders the efforts against climate change, despite greater transport costs, because poor farmers create far fewer emissions than industrialised Europeans). On the other hand, policies such as the creation of biofuels undermine diversity and food security. Finally, there is a clear contradiction between mitigating climate change and preserving the coastal and rural environment when it comes to developing renewable sources of energy such as wind power and onshore wave power.

The human world also needs conserving, as well as the natural environment. The conservative should try to conserve landscapes of significance, whether they serve cultures' sense of history and memory,<sup>2</sup> their ideals (in the way that rural France expresses an ideal) or their leisure behaviour. Cities ought to be liveable, pleasant places with green spaces, non-oppressive architecture and clean air.<sup>3</sup> Landscapes, cities and villages sustain ways of life, and simultaneously slow down the willed pace of change. Such environments cannot be designed, but they can evolve and should be protected.

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<sup>1</sup> John Gray, 'Green conservatism', in *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment*, London: Routledge, 1993, 124-177.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003, 15-19, Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, 192-197.

<sup>3</sup> The *locus classicus* here is Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House, 1961.

## The need for green policy

The problem that climate change poses for any kind of politics is that the following propositions are all true, yet few find all five palatable.

1. The world is warming at least partly thanks to human intervention, use of fossil fuels, etc, as far as the best science can tell.
2. These interventions cannot easily be reversed. Human societies cannot simply cease to use fossil fuels. There is currently no conceivable way to replace them in total with alternatives such as nuclear power, wind power or solar power.
3. As we would expect from the knowledge principle, we cannot expect science to deliver certainty about (1). There will be no unequivocal proof either of its truth or its falsity, and so politicians will always have to balance risk, short and long term considerations, and the prospects of electoral success.
4. On the international scene, there is no easy way to broker a compromise between the wealthy nations which have largely caused the problem, and the developing nations which are currently blameless, but whose projected emissions will be extremely damaging in the future. Yet curbing those emissions threatens to prevent development and entrench poverty.
5. Free people, whether voters in democracies or consumers in free markets, show very few signs of being prepared to accept the need for personal sacrifice.

Change, innovation and risk are the objects of conservative interest. The knowledge principle stresses the uncertainty of science in complex areas. Computer models of climate – one of the most complex dynamic systems that are routinely modelled – cannot expect to be accurate, especially over the relevant timescales. As Nigel Lawson, a former British Chancellor who has recently entered the debate about climate change, has cogently argued, just because a computer model indicates problems ahead, it does not follow that what is modelled needs protection.<sup>4</sup> We should not confuse the model with the system.

However, although the knowledge principle encourages scepticism, evidence-based policy is essential. The conservative must take notice of the broad and increasing scientific consensus that human effects on climate are becoming evident, and will be more marked through the coming century unless action is taken to curb the production of greenhouse gases. Current levels of greenhouse gases including CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere will tend to push global temperatures higher. Worst-case scenarios, which are by no means certain to happen, suggest that by 2100 the change in temperature from pre-industrial levels will be greater than the difference between those levels and the world at the time of the last ice age.

Current attempts to mitigate the human effects on climate are, if the science is remotely plausible, clearly inadequate. They will slow rather than halt or reverse warming, even if ambitious targets are met (and it is doubtful they will be). CO<sub>2</sub>, remains in the atmosphere for centuries. Re-establishing levels from a previous era (1990 is often used as a baseline) would be an economic and political nightmare. Furthermore, as the world grows gradually richer, a trend of people moving from a

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<sup>4</sup> Nigel Lawson, *An Appeal to Reason: A Cool Look at Global Warming*, London: Duckworth, 2008, 7-16.

vegetarian to an omnivorous diet seems to be accelerating, which, if served by the worldwide agricultural industry, would result in massive increases of atmospheric methane, an even more potent greenhouse gas, from farm animals.

The greater prominence of climate change in political discussion has not been accompanied by the required shift in economic and political priorities. Cap-and-trade systems for managing carbon have been rigged by giveaways which have lowered its price and undermined the creation of incentives for active management of emissions. Recession and high oil prices between them should slow economic activity with correspondingly positive effects on the environment (post-Kyoto recession in Russia meant that their emissions fell below the 1990 baseline level without their having to try to reduce them), yet politicians see no trade-off here, and work tirelessly to create economic growth and lower the price of energy, often berating oil companies for profiteering. In a contest between the environment and the economy, there will only ever be one winner.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, even relatively environmentally-friendly governments like that of Germany are chary of taking measures against important polluting industries (in the case of the Germans, coal). In the United Kingdom, the New Labour government, despite its occasional adoption of a green tinge, fought shy of taking on the road or the airport lobbies. And many of the British reductions of emissions came on the back of opportunistic policies that have little to do with valuing the environment *per se*; the greater use of gas rather than more expensive coal for electricity generation has been an entirely economic decision which could easily be reversed.

The conservative is sceptical about science, but not antipathetic. Many supposed climate-change 'sceptics' are not sceptics at all – they dogmatically deny its possibility. This is not a position available to the conservative. No conservatism worth the name can disregard the contradictory and confusing evidence, the dire predictions of the scientific models, the soundness of their bases, their massive uncertainty and not least the interests of the scientists themselves in fomenting fear and garnering funding. The conservative may believe the threat is overstated, or understated, but it is not an option for her to refuse to engage with the debate.

Global warming presents a risk, and the conservative is risk-averse. The risk is massive in extent, affecting billions of people, possibly very drastically. On the other hand, there is also evident risk in restructuring entire economies and ways of life to address warming. Drastic measures could waste a lot of resources. This is a difficult balance for the conservative but at least it sets the tone for political debate. In the event of a clash of risk perceptions, a sensible mid-way is to canvass the possibility of incremental and reversible actions to mitigate each type of risk, hedging between the two and supporting further investigation until the evidence starts to come in.<sup>6</sup> In the context of global warming, this will inevitably be less than either side wishes, more expensive than the sceptics want and not enough to ward off the worst-case scenarios. However, the sceptics demand too much certainty before they will take the risk

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Pielke Jr., *The Climate Fix: What Scientists and Politicians Won't Tell You About Global Warming*, New York: Basic Books, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> It is essential that the scientific research is neutral here, which is why the actions of scientists at the University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit, withholding data from public scrutiny and being partial to their own theories, were so unforgiveable, even though the scientists and administrators were more or less exonerated by several investigations and reports. I have already argued at some length that spinning climate science would ultimately be a self-defeating mistake, undermining trust in the science, in my *Trust: From Socrates to Spin*, Duxford: Icon Books, 2004, 171-178.

seriously, and the environmentalists season their rhetoric with arbitrary deadlines, limits and thresholds.

When risk is unquantifiable, risk perceptions and political considerations become as important as scientific data – an essentially culturally-dependent point of which the conservative is aware and with which she is better able to deal than most. As Beck puts it:

The more overtly global risks elude the scientific methods for calculating them, the more influential becomes the perception of risk. The distinction between real risks and the perception of risk becomes blurred. Who *believes* in a risk and why becomes more important than the sophisticated probability scenarios of the experts.<sup>7</sup>

## Conservatism and the precautionary principle

In this context, it is worth contrasting the conservative attitude to risk with the precautionary principle, an idea adopted by some environmentalists. This has been defined in a number of often mutually inconsistent ways<sup>8</sup> but:

The essential idea behind the principle is that, in the face of uncertainty about the possible harm associated with some activity or technology, greater emphasis should be placed on providing evidence that harm will not result. In the absence of such evidence of 'no harm', the principle suggests that an activity or technology should be restricted to protect against possible (potential or theoretical) harm until evidence of safety is reliably established.<sup>9</sup>

The precautionary principle (PP) is intended to prevent or minimise risk, drawing the line at tolerating even the risk of a risk.<sup>10</sup> It is widely considered to be incoherent,<sup>11</sup> and many radical greens also distance themselves from it (often associating it, interestingly, with conservatism).<sup>12</sup> This last is a false association but the contrast helps establish the parameters of the conservative's attitude to change. It is straightforward to enumerate the differences.

1. The conservative does not insist on establishing that harm will *not* result from change or risk-taking. Given the knowledge principle, she will consider such evidence uncertain anyway. Rather, she wants to be reassured that the expectation of harm is relatively low compared with the potential benefits.
2. Evidence of 'no harm' will almost always be extremely hard to determine. Certain defined risks can be investigated, but to show that no harm is possible, it needs to be established that even unanticipated risks can be discounted – but this is next to impossible. What evidence can be brought to bear against a risk that no-one has yet formulated? This requirement goes way beyond the conservative's worry about unintended consequences. The PP is therefore a

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<sup>7</sup> Ulrich Beck, *World At Risk*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009, 196. Also relevant here (cited explicitly by Beck) is Mary Douglas & Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Laws of Fear*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Gilland, 'Introduction' in Tony Gilland (ed.), *Science: Can We Trust the Experts?* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002, xi-xxii, at xvii-xviii.

<sup>10</sup> O'Hara, *Trust*, 186-191.

<sup>11</sup> Sunstein, *Laws of Fear*, O'Hara, *Trust*, 178-201, Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009, 57-61.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, 59-60.

recipe for stasis. Humankind has discovered many things, including fire and the PP; luckily we discovered fire first, because had it been the other way around the PP would have ruled out using it under any circumstances.

3. The conservative's scepticism also rules out her accepting that 'no harm' is possible. The PP contains no injunction against change; if the possibility of harm is ruled out, then the innovation, according to the PP, can be carried through, however drastic it is. For the conservative, the knowledge principle tells her that that, whatever has been proven about 'no harm' to the satisfaction of the experts, something may still go awry, and hence the change principle means that she will still harbour concerns about change. Small-c conservatism is a philosophy of risk and change, while the PP is concerned entirely with risk, and not at all with change (although it will in many cases prevent change happening).
4. The PP is a universal principle. For the conservative, however, 'acceptably small' is a term relative to the society for which she is legislating. A country such as the US has a strong tolerance of risk, and so an American conservative will typically be less cautious. European nations will be more cautious. A nation which is clearly dysfunctional, such as, say, Somalia or Afghanistan, might well be prepared to accept a greater expectation of harm relative to benefits because improvement of the dysfunctional is a greater good than the preservation of the functional when little is functioning.

Hence conservatism is less risk-averse and more context-aware than the precautionary principle, and fundamentally concerned with managing and mitigating the effects of change. The PP, on the other hand, is a binary maxim by which change, however radical, is either allowed or forbidden. Small-c conservatism is an attitude of scepticism towards, but not rejection of, risk and change. How this works itself out in the environmental context is explored in the next section.

## The fundamental incoherence at the heart of green philosophy

Green philosophy comes in two forms, *ecologism*, a thoroughgoing focus on the environment as the prime source of value, and *environmentalism*, a more pragmatic ideology of managing the environment using existing structures where possible.<sup>13</sup> Ecologism is of course incompatible with conservatism for several dozen reasons of which the main two are that it does not support a plurality of values, and it demands radical change not only in political structures but also human nature. Environmentalism is often disregarded by ideological ecologism as deluded (its hypothesis that drastic action is not necessary to save the planet being the sticking point), and may, in some guises, be consistent with conservatism. Andrew Dobson, a leading philosopher of ecologism, denies that environmentalism is an ideology at all, which seems like a draconian use of Occam's razor to me.

Nevertheless these fraternal disputes are not the business of the conservative, their resolution rendered irrelevant by a fundamental contradiction at the heart of ecologism (and indeed environmentalism, in at least some of its forms). Ecologism is torn between democracy and authoritarianism. Green philosophies are big on self-determination, localism, direct democracy and quasi-anarchistic social and political

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<sup>13</sup> Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 2-6.

structures.<sup>14</sup> Oppressive institutions, and the false consciousness they impart, get the blame for much environmental damage. Debate, discussion and self-determination are the answer; liberate the individual.

Which is all very well, but when there is a single privileged source of value in your philosophy, then the obvious problem with self-determination is that some people will determine for themselves that they will ignore, or rebel against, the governing creed. Democracy and localism are fine unless a lot of local communities vote against recycling and wind farms and too many individuals prefer internal combustion engines to bicycles.

In such circumstances, what will greens do? Will recalcitrants be marched at gunpoint to the recycling centre by bobble-hatted *Gauleiters*, or will they be allowed to free-ride on the efforts of everyone else? This is not a dilemma that can be resolved; if force is eschewed, then ecologism depends on a substantial change in human nature. Will that change be imposed, e.g. by propaganda or mass education? Or will it just be hoped for? Can the authenticity and autonomy that greens admire be fostered without simultaneously crushing independence? It is unlikely.

Small-c conservatism has three advantages over ecologism. Firstly, it positively welcomes diverse sources of value, and so has no comparable dilemma. In particular, its notion of environment is associated specifically with human uses, and so is more in tune with human societies as they currently exist. It does not accept a conception of a 'nature' – which is an artificial construct anyway – whose value is independent of its use and perception by people, and whose preservation should be the sole purpose of right-minded individuals. Rather, the environment, for a conservative, should be sustainable, in order to lower risks of catastrophes, and should be understood relative to other social sources of value. The environment thereby includes not only wilderness but also well-managed countryside, farmland and agriculture, as well as pleasant and civilised villages, towns and cities.

Secondly, conservatism as an ideology is specifically designed to go with the grain of human nature. Human beings are imperfect and difficult, and any politics that does not take that into account is doomed. Ecologism, on the other hand, is not afraid to seek radical change in human nature,<sup>15</sup> the effects of which (even if it were possible) would be potentially dangerous and certainly unpredictable. It is important to note that ruralist philosophies designed to re-establish the authentic human relationship with the soil have been tried before, in China and Cambodia for instance, with disastrous results.

Thirdly, the conservative has no problem with authority, including scientific authority. *Modulo* the knowledge principle, understanding a set of risks is enough to support a debate. If it is determined that remedial or preventative measures are demanded by a situation – and it is my view that the current state of climate science, while extremely uncertain, does suggest important risks that need to be tackled – then the conservative is not shy of legislating and regulating, however inauthentic citizens are deemed to be. She is concerned with results, not authenticity.

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<sup>14</sup> Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 103-147, Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change*, 50-57.

<sup>15</sup> Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 164-165.

## Green conservatism: strategy

How, then, should the green conservative proceed? I have already suggested that she should balance risks and try to amass further scientific evidence if possible. In this section I shall elaborate a little further, moving onto specific policy issues in the next.

### *Six principles*

The knowledge principle and the change principle suggest six important principles of procedure, many of which are actually already implied in current environmental law.<sup>16</sup>

1. Decision-making should be distributed where possible across relevant actors. In particular, the scientific process of risk assessment should be separated clearly from the political process of risk management,<sup>17</sup> not least because different cultures will have different perceptions and tolerances of risk. The same decision need not be mandated in the US, Europe or sub-Saharan Africa, even though the science is presumably the same and the sea level will rise to the same degree. The responsible politician's role is to interpret the science, communicate its findings to the citizenry, and formulate and defend policy.
2. Evidence should be amassed and evaluated constantly. A proper scepticism means that the data should be tested and added to, not ignored.
3. The burden of proof rests with the innovator, but equally the bar should not be set so high as to deny the possibility of action at any stage. Furthermore it should be lowered if the risks are shown to be greater. Good and peer-reviewed science is needed in order to establish risk. Innovation, legislation and regulation need to be proportionate.
4. This is not simply a cost/benefit analysis. Many of the issues to be balanced are incommensurable. The Stern review on climate change<sup>18</sup> is to be commended for its ingenuity in addressing the bottom line, but although money is a useful *lingua franca* of value, it is not the only measure. General considerations of health, biodiversity, tradition and aesthetics are also important in different ways across communities. Although there are ways of expressing these in economic terms (e.g. via concepts from insurance), they cannot and should not be completely monetised. Small-c conservatism stands for plurality of value.

To make a more general point, quantification is a fine and important thing but it cannot substitute for objectivity or clarity. Quantification may be a very good route to such ends, but it is not the only one, and it is not guaranteed to achieve them either. All claims to objectivity need to be scrutinised very closely, as all sorts of assumptions can be smuggled into quantitative valuation, whether unconsciously or otherwise. Discounting essentially qualitative factors, such as that of intergenerational justice, reduces the evidence base and narrows the extent of acceptable value sources for decision-

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mark Stallworthy, *Understanding Environmental Law*, London: Sweet & Maxwell, 157-159.

<sup>17</sup> O'Hara, *Trust*, 171ff.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Stern, *Blueprint for a Safer Planet: How to Manage Climate Change and Create a New Era of Progress and Prosperity*, London: The Bodley Head, 2009.

making. It reduces the range of detectable risks, thereby increasing the likelihood of risky change, against the dictates of the change principle.<sup>19</sup>

5. Quantification tends to introduce arbitrariness into decision making ('we *must* keep the probability of a rise in global temperature of  $x^\circ$  by time  $t$  below  $y\%$ ' – where do these limits come from?). The evidence both quantitative and qualitative should be examined and the current evaluation of the risks informed by several interests and points of view. The knowledge principle tells us that there is no single Archimedean point from which to judge these matters, and the change principle rules out the artificial use of limits and thresholds. In the first place, these can be no more than rough guesses, and in the second place what can the significant difference between probabilities of  $y\%$  and  $(y-1)\%$  possibly be in this context? The policymaker should demand neither the elimination, nor the absolute proof, of risk. Decisions should be reversible where possible, and incremental. Rigorous evaluation of every step is essential, as ever with conservative policymaking.
6. It goes without saying that climate change is a worldwide problem, requiring a cosmopolitan approach. International cooperation is desirable, and the conservative needs to be open to this. A particularly thorny issue is that of causes and prognoses – the rich world caused most of the problem, but projected growth is higher in the developing world. This rift has caused most of the obstacles in recent years to concerted action. Considerations of intergenerational justice incline me to the view that the rich world has a moral duty to make as big a contribution as possible (a judgment shared with Lord Lawson).<sup>20</sup> However, the conservative's understanding of practicality and the 'art of the possible' also makes her realise that no strategy can *depend* on international agreement. The likelihood of the EU, the US, China, India and others all coming to a global understanding of the distribution of responsibility, and allowing their sovereignty to be thereby compromised, is so close to nil that major international treaties cannot be the starting point for addressing the issue.

## **Technology**

Technology will clearly be part of any strategy to address warming. Some technologies will be incremental – greater fuel efficiency on vehicles, for example. Others will be more ambitious, and therefore need greater care in their introduction. Smart sensors, wirelessly linked, can improve efficiency dramatically in systems by providing a fuller picture of resource use to human or automatic monitors. Road congestion, to take one example, is incredibly wasteful of time and petrol, and increases pollution; a more efficient transport system, using real-time congestion monitoring and ultimately smarter cars that can coordinate their position, speed and acceleration with nearby vehicles will make an enormous difference. The technology to achieve such efficiencies is not many years away. Similar progress will inevitably be made in power provision, fixing water leaks, reducing the costs of air travel, monitoring the waste products of agriculture, factories or chemical plants, and so on.

That is not to say that technology fixes will always work. In Boulder, CO, the world's first really smart electricity grid has been developed, with 20,000 smart meters in

<sup>19</sup> Stallworthy, *Understanding Environmental Law*, 169-172.

<sup>20</sup> Lawson, *An Appeal to Reason*, 98.



place.<sup>21</sup> However, people are not using much less electricity than they did before, while the project cost overruns have been large. Boulder is not a small city – a smaller pilot would have been welcome – and it seems that the promise of the project may have tempted regulators into relatively lenient treatment of finance and project management.<sup>22</sup> Once more the conservative message holds: even if you are convinced that global warming is the most important problem humanity faces, bold innovation may still be counterproductive. Gather evidence via incremental change instead. Patience is a virtue.

So, in this area, is smallness. The beauty of smart systems is that they can be introduced incrementally; the larger the network of sensors, the greater the efficiencies that can be gained, but even a small network can improve matters. The beauty of better car or aeroplane engines is that they can be rolled out one vehicle at a time. On the other hand, some technologies are inevitably large, demanding major risky investments. They may promise much, but big technology takes the long and winding road from promise to delivery. For example, carbon capture and storage (CCS) is a putative method for capturing CO<sub>2</sub> as it leaves a power station; many in the power generation industry have high hopes for it. However, it will inevitably use a great deal of energy itself and will require enormous investment before it is commercially viable, in effect wiping out any financial gain from greater efficiency in a power plant for decades. Furthermore it is completely unknown how efficient carbon storage will be (some studies make extraordinary predictions, such as an IPCC report that claimed that it would be likely that 99% of CO<sub>2</sub> in storage would remain so for 1,000 years, an assertion whose content must be dwarfed by the potential error).<sup>23</sup> None of this suggests that CCS should not be pursued, but engineers, governments and investors should be aware of the risk that large, risky investments can crowd out smaller projects with more certain gains.

### ***The risks of the last resort***

One thing we should *not* do is hope that a quick technical fix will emerge in the event that the risk is underestimated. Lawson suggests that we carry on more or less as we are, adapting (with flood defences, GM crops and other measures) when climate change forces us and otherwise following market signals. This is standard neo-liberal strategy, but Lawson also addresses the major concern of greens that this approach may allow things to drift until suddenly catastrophe happens and it is too late to do anything about it. His idea is that so-called geoengineering can be brought into play if drastic measures are required; although ‘there is no hard scientific evidence to suggest that catastrophes of this kind may be in the offing, nor is it plausible that they could suddenly emerge without warning ... there is almost certainly a viable measure to keep in our back pocket for use should the highly unlikely threat of catastrophe ever loom large.’<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> <http://smartgridcity.xcelenergy.com/>, Stephanie Simon, ‘The more you know ...’, *Wall Street Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Mauldin, ‘Boulder smart grid: handicapped from the start?’ *Intelligent Energy Portal*, 6<sup>th</sup> Sept, 2010, <http://intelligentenergyportal.com/article/boulder-smart-grid-handicapped-start>.

<sup>23</sup> Bert Metz, Ogunlade Davidson, Heleen de Coninck, Manuela Loos & Leo Meyer (eds.), *Carbon Dioxide Capture and Storage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2005, [http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/special-reports/srccs/srccs\\_wholereport.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/special-reports/srccs/srccs_wholereport.pdf), 246.

<sup>24</sup> Lawson, *An Appeal to Reason*, 87.

Geoengineering is the application of technology on a large scale to cool the planet quickly. It is, of course, entirely theoretical. Nevertheless, two basic strategies have emerged: to reduce the amount of sunlight the earth receives, and to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere. Examples of the former include measures to whiten clouds to increase their reflective power, and to blast aerosols into the atmosphere to impede the sun's rays (Lawson's favourite). CO<sub>2</sub> could possibly be removed by capturing it at source and burying it, or by fertilising the oceans with iron in order to encourage plankton to absorb more of it. Lawson calls geoengineering a 'worthwhile precautionary policy'.<sup>25</sup>

For the conservative, this kind of technical rationality is anathema. If anything is certain in this area, it is that the disruption of the sun's rays will have effects as dramatic as global warming on local temperatures, ocean currents and the like. The oceans, which have received an appalling battering from humankind in the last century, host highly degraded ecosystems close to land, and filling them full of iron is likely to produce extraordinary unintended consequences.

The change principle tells us to rebalance risk and potential benefit; the risks involved in any geoengineering project large enough to be effective must surely, except in circumstances much more extreme than Lawson envisages, outweigh the potential benefit. The conservative can probably console herself with the thought that, if the world could not agree on a relatively simple set of principles at Copenhagen in 2009, it will almost certainly be unable to get its act together to cooperate on an engineering project on such a giant scale.<sup>26</sup>

## **Green conservatism: policy**

Green conservatism is an opportunity to put principles into practice against a vociferous minority of green ideologues, and a somewhat sceptical, apathetic and (let it be said, even in a democracy) selfish majority of voters and consumers. The task is made harder, (a) by the rather cavalier treatment of the environment by past right wing governments which has had the effect that conservatives are not trusted on conservation (although as a matter of fact the degradation of the environment was infinitely worse in socialist countries across the iron curtain), and (b) by the puritanism and scare tactics of radical greens which must take some of the blame for widespread doubt. In this section I shall discuss some matters of policy, before moving onto philosophical and moral issues of concern.

## ***Mobilising markets***

The conservative understands the importance of markets because of their integration with human life and society. They cannot and should not be neglected in environmental considerations. In fact, many problems with green policies as they are currently implemented stem from governments' trying to determine outcomes from the top down instead of creating ways for small-scale decisions to shape our environmental future. The conservative may disagree with Hayek that the price signal

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<sup>25</sup> Lawson, *An Appeal to Reason*, 98.

<sup>26</sup> One wonders whether this is Lawson's covert point. He almost seems to be saying that if greens are determined to spend money to address warming, geoengineering research is the safest, because least practical, measure to spend it on. At worst the money will be wasted, and at best the research will tell us something about our climate systems. It won't therefore do as much harm as, say, subsidising certain technologies which will skew markets away from the efficient use of capital. If this is Lawson's idea, then it's a little risky: history tells us that once a technology has been developed, the pressures to use it are powerful.

is the only accurate or important parameter for determining resource allocation, but she certainly understands its value, and unlike others concerned with environmental issues, is prepared to exploit its potential.

A number of obvious points can be made with respect to the use of markets to regulate the environment. First, pricing should be more sensitive to social cost. Polluters should have to pay – even when they pollute resources held in common, such as the deep ocean. Disposal costs for goods and packaging should be factored in where possible; there are a number of methods for doing this, but the most obvious is to make manufacturers responsible for clearing up (a practice known as ‘extended producer responsibility’ or ‘product stewardship’).<sup>27</sup> This method has generally been used for specific products such as tyres or electronic goods, but in 2010 Maine became the first US state to introduce a law covering, in principle, everything. Canada has experimented with such methods for a while.

Second, green principles need to be supported against producer power. The dirtier industries in the US have been able, by judicious financing of politicians’ campaigns, to make themselves sacrosanct. Even in Germany, one of the more environmentally sensitive places on the planet, mining interests had enough political clout to wreck the EU’s emissions trading system. Loopholes should be plugged where they can; environmental laws, like other regulatory codes, should be made as simple and clear as possible, without get-outs for determined lobbyists.

Third, general taxes (e.g. on emissions) are a better tool than bans or specific measures against specific industries, practices or technologies. Regulators may decide, for instance, that methane needs to be tackled as a potent greenhouse gas. Fair enough, but the way to do this is not to penalise particular sources of methane such as landfill sites, but rather to set standards for methane emissions across the board. This would encourage the development of methods in all relevant areas, including managing landfill, that met agreed standards.

Fourth, markets are better than targets. Most nations have targets for recycling, for instance, but the knowledge principle tells us that we cannot know the best balance between recycling and production from scratch. Quite apart from the potential for absurdity (in some places in the UK, targets were set for collecting recyclable goods but not for recycling itself, so recyclable waste was collected separately and then remixed with other waste for disposal),<sup>28</sup> it is purely dogma to state that ‘all’ materials should be recycled, or ‘80%’ – why not 78% or 82%? Sometimes, recycling can be hard on the environment because of the need for transport and collection. Far better to find measures to price in the externalities of non-recycled goods, and let the sum of individual consumption decisions determine the balance.

Finally, it is often said that those nations which take an environmental lead will be disadvantaged. There are certainly important issues about free-riding in international trade – many nations are completely unmoved by the need for environmental regulation *except* when they see the lack of it elsewhere as an excuse to ban imports. The conservative is of course alive to the fact that money is not the only measure of value, and so should be prepared to give environmental considerations due weight. Even so, it is clearly important to develop best practice and to try different approaches

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Sharon Beder, *Environmental Principles and Policies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, London: Earthscan, 2006, 44–46.

<sup>28</sup> Kieron O'Hara, *After Blair: David Cameron and the Conservative Tradition*, Thriplow: Icon Books, 2007, 140–141

in creating markets, because ultimately these will be the best tools available. Certainly if we wait for international agreement before anyone tries anything, the environment will suffer, as analysis of current initiatives clearly shows.

### ***The inadequacy of markets and the difficulty of making the green case***

Having said all that, economics narrowly defined in neo-liberal terms cannot be the sole basis for decision-making. Pricing structures determine what is an externality and what is endogenous, and the decision as to what affects pricing beyond basic producer costs is political, not economic. In particular, a green conservative is prepared to forgo income for other goods, which might include not only a reduced risk of climate change, but also beautiful countryside, peace and quiet, clean air, unpolluted coastal waters, magnificent old buildings and churches, rich and diverse fauna and flora, hunting traditions or whatever.

Helping, or causing, the economy to adapt to the use of fewer carbon-based resources is a part of that effort. There is no reason to believe this will be very costly, although the slippery nature of the risks involved makes it impossible to be certain. Stern's estimate of the cost is low, but makes a number of questionable assumptions. The knowledge principle applies. Stern's optimism means that error correction is more likely to be at the pessimistic end; slowing climate change is likely to be more expensive rather than less.

Those sceptics who are unimpressed with Stern's argument ignore the fact that merely reconceptualising exogenous costs as endogenous does not affect the *total* cost of the environmental effort. The problem for the green is that the responsibilities for *bearing* costs will change, so that some people will gain and others lose depending on which costs are priced in, and which not. We can be more specific; with greener policies, many of the costs will be shifted from future generations to us in the here and now, and many will be shifted from the developing world to the rich world. Hence it is probably the case that a determined effort to address climate change and other orthogonal environmental issues will *increase* the burden on current voters in wealthy democracies. Most objective observers will also note that not only are these the people most capable of taking on that burden, but also that they and their ancestors bear most responsibility for the mess in the first place. That does not mean that it will be an easy case to make.

David Cameron took great strides in opposition<sup>29</sup> to promote green policy, and to obliterate the impression of the British Conservative Party as insensitive to environmental issues,<sup>30</sup> and in 2009, as the depth of the credit crunch became increasingly obvious, the Conservatives published a brave green paper about the transition to a low-carbon UK economy.<sup>31</sup> Brave, but nevertheless not brave enough. It is true that, as the green paper suggested, it 'will help create hundreds of thousands of jobs' in a new green economy (and the proposals, such as a smart electricity grid, are admirable and extremely sensible), but it seems hardly likely that these new

<sup>29</sup> Kieron O'Hara, 'Go blue, get green conservatism', *e-Pol*, 2(3), Oct 2009, 20-22.

<sup>30</sup> This is an unfair view of Margaret Thatcher's leadership, although the justice of its application to her successors William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard is indisputable. See my 'Go blue, get green conservatism'.

<sup>31</sup> *The Low Carbon Economy: Security, Stability and Green Growth*, Conservative Party Protecting Security Policy Green Paper No.8 (n.d.).

opportunities will offset corresponding losses in the economy's grubbier sectors. The green paper argued that 'the reckless accumulation of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere will impose costs on our children and their children,' which is true, but if forgoing the benefits of that accumulation now were without cost *for us*, then surely we would do it. If, as it maintained, it is 'selfish' for current consumers and producers to continue to produce carbon emissions, then they must benefit economically from it. It is not selfish to do something self-harming.

Greening the economy will be a hard sell, particularly in a global recession. I believe that doing so is in the interests of individuals and society both in the developed and the developing world, but it is not in the hard-headed short-to-medium term financial interests of many investors in the economy as currently constituted, nor of a majority of consumers in the rich world. It needn't be super-painful, but it might be costly for some and tedious in terms of changing behaviour. I fear that the Tory line (shared, incidentally, with Stern) that this is a great opportunity did we but know it, may be sowing the seeds of future disillusion.

### ***The failure of Copenhagen***

Nevertheless, two and a half cheers for Cameron for pursuing the greenery which so marked his first year as leader.<sup>32</sup> The green paper's *policies* seem eminently sensible although its *politics* are over-optimistic. Indeed, optimism, wilfulness or just plain ineptitude marks almost every aspect of environmental politics, ranging from dogmatic 'scepticism' from characters such as Christopher Booker, cretinous hopes for radical change from green theorists, the wrong-headed pursuit of consumerism, mendacity from some leading climate scientists, disinformation from the energy and mining sectors, and the inability of governments to eschew the politics of the pork barrel. We must hope that crisis does not occur, because otherwise this generation will get a very bad press from historians of the future (assuming that they are not underwater).

As a case in point, consider the Copenhagen Conference on climate change that took place at the end of 2009,<sup>33</sup> which ended unsurprisingly in a weak deal of little value. Although this was hardly a cause for celebration, neither was it the disaster it was portrayed as. The fact is that high stakes summitry is the worst possible method for trying to address the multifarious issues behind global warming. Any successes that can be achieved in such a crucible are to be welcomed – but they are not to be relied upon. Kyoto went surprisingly well, largely thanks to the refusal of the US to engage (and thereby throw its weight about), and the failure to place any meaningful requirements on poorer countries, but that will be the exception, not the norm.

The knowledge principle and the change principle entail a deep suspicion of targets and arbitrary thresholds, yet the Copenhagen approach, with its inflated rhetoric of 'humankind's last chance', its idiotic strategy of setting global emissions targets, and its insane method of authorising fixed transfers of resources between countries (\$100bn a year by 2020, another target), went headlong in that direction.

The social and climate engineers of Copenhagen wanted to solve the problem, despite that fact that it is not a problem that can be *solved*. CO<sub>2</sub> stays in the atmosphere for centuries, so a great deal of the damage is to all intents and purposes irreversible,

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<sup>32</sup> O'Hara, *After Blair: David Cameron and the Conservative Tradition*, 198-205.

<sup>33</sup> [http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop\\_15/items/5257.php](http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop_15/items/5257.php).

while it is hard to see methane production doing anything other than growing dramatically over the next few decades. If we carry on as we are the situation looks like deteriorating, but even on optimistic projections it is likely to get worse, albeit at a slower rate. This is not a binary yes/no, OK-we've-solved-it/nope-it's-a-disaster situation. If the science is remotely accurate, then the situation will get worse. We don't know how much worse it will get, whether it will be tolerable (and indeed how many people will be unequivocally better off), or whether it will be genuinely catastrophic. Reality will unfold, making targets irrelevant; there is a continuum on which any target will be an arbitrary point. We might hit the targets and everything be a disaster, or we might miss them and everything be hunky dory.

The mobilisation of targets is a huge mistake. Any target system will set up perverse incentives and provide all sorts of unintended consequences as everyone merrily tries to free-ride and game the system. The awkward mixture of past and future responsibility for the problem means that there will be no way of distributing responsibility for reaching the target equitably. Any target must have a long-term component, and no government can possibly commit its successors in a binding way. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to plan sensibly through time; it is all too easy to promise major cuts in the future, while making minor cuts now.

If mitigation is not a solution, neither is adaptation. It is quite likely that some nations could adapt to some of the inconveniences (e.g. with flood defences), and other nations might gain as cold lands become more fertile. Other places, even well-resourced ones, will make a mess of adaptation. It may be hugely expensive (and not cost-effective, as Stern argues), or relatively sensible. Certainly a willingness to adapt is required, but it is not enough. It is quite possible that the science is wrong and that the changes required are small, making adaptation possible – but we do not know that now.

Having said that, adaptation, as Michael Grenfell has suggested to me, must be part of the picture for a conservative. The knowledge principle tells us that any mitigating measure will be based on uncertain projections into the future. Furthermore, having implemented such a measure, we will never know whether the projections were right even with hindsight (because the implemented measure will have changed the relevant parameters). On the other hand, adaptation, which is a response to actual circumstances in a manner appropriate for a particular community, is consistent with the knowledge and change principles.

We have to accept that the only possible way to address the issue is by a combination of anticipatory changes in behaviour *and* adaptation. We should expect to have to build flood defences or develop drought-resistant crops *while still* moving away from the carbon economy. And even if we did all this, it is extremely unlikely that this will stop global warming. All we can realistically hope to do is slow it down.

There is no doubt that there will have to be transfers of money from the rich world (which can afford it, and which largely caused the problem), to the poor (which cannot and did not). But – as Copenhagen showed – there is no way that the requisite figure could be agreed in advance of agreement on measures. This is partly because we genuinely do not know what measures will be required, and partly because we cannot know what measures will be possible over the relevant timescales (e.g. will it be feasible to build flood defences in coastal Somalia in 2020?).

Perhaps the main reason why there will be no advance agreement is that the rich countries will refuse to make one. It is a political impossibility. If the EU, the USA and Japan cannot make the relatively small compromises required, say, to keep the WTO talks going, or to preserve fishing stocks, or to produce a more globally sensitive set of subsidies for agriculture, then they are hardly likely to write an open-ended cheque for climate change. Few nations have made a serious effort to explain to voters that this requires an engaged approach from everyone. This is not something that can only be solved by top down targets and legislation; there needs to be buy-in in all strata of society. Similarly, very few of the key nations are willing to sacrifice sovereignty to make targets binding. The USA very rarely binds itself to any agreement. France is always fiercely protective of her interests and is prepared to break agreements or stretch them to the limit. Given China's stances over all sorts of issues over the last twenty years, it would hardly be likely to agree to a transparent verification regime.

It is obvious that a 'global response' will always founder. No world government will emerge any time soon, although some in the green movement continue to cling to the hope that there will be one, as a monument to their unworldliness.<sup>34</sup> Even if global agreements can be achieved, they still will have to be implemented by national governments. Furthermore, any system of penalties, sanctions or fines will be shrugged off by the powerful, and will merely exacerbate the problems of the poor. Ultimately, addressing global warming will involve persuading as many national governments as possible to make serious efforts, persuasion that will sometimes come from international organisations, sometimes from business, sometimes from voters. Indeed, the track record so far shows that small countries, usually with highly homogeneous populations, have made most inroads; the larger and more heterogeneous the polity, the worse the record.<sup>35</sup>

There are clearly too many interests and factors to be dealt with at a single conference (compare the experience of trade talks in the past). Rich democracies have sceptical voters to convince, sometimes in the context of extremely polarised domestic politics (in particular the USA). Some nations bear little historical responsibility, but can be expected to increase emissions dramatically in the future (China, India). Some nations have serious problems with governance. Some worry not so much about reducing the carbon economy, but rather are faced with the extremely difficult problem of preventing deforestation in remote areas (Brazil, Indonesia). The Arctic nations, if not their polar bears, will benefit from the melting of sea ice. Other nations, such as Tuvalu, may disappear entirely in short order. For many, particularly in Africa, the issue is food and migration. The Copenhagen conference fractured along all these lines, as it was bound to do.

This is all about complexity, as the knowledge and change principles warn us. There will not be *an* answer, *the* solution. What is absolutely extraordinary is that so many people think there might be – and that so much was put at stake for it at the Copenhagen summit in 2009. And note also that even if there was a 'solution', achieving it would not enable us to chalk it up as a success and move onto the next issue; if the science is correct, the need for vigilance against climate change will be forever with us.

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<sup>34</sup> George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order*, London: Flamingo, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change*, 75-80.

What, then, can be done? One point crying out to be made is that *every* measure helps. We will not solve the problem by hitting a target, but any successful measure will ameliorate the global problem to an extent. The more ambitious the better – unless being ambitious makes it more likely to fail. Evaluation should be rigorous, as unintended consequences may make us worse off in the end. The more schemes, better evaluated, the quicker best practice will spread.

It follows that there is no need to await international agreement. There is no need for a ten- or twenty- or thirty-year plan, or to promise 3,000 wind farms across the Highlands of Scotland or a giant solar panel over the Mojave Desert by 2025. Let the British first see whether 10 wind farms are useful, before building another 10 if they help,<sup>36</sup> and let the Americans start a solar power programme without waiting for the Chinese to agree on transparency. Let the French specialists Areva build some nuclear power stations with their much-vaunted EPR pressurised water technology, and see how expensive they are and how they perform (at the time of writing a state-of-the-art facility in Olkiluoto in Finland is years behind schedule and over €1 billion over budget). Let's be careful with subsidies, but also try to factor the cost of emissions into new investment (both private and public), so that capital is targeted most efficiently. Let's experiment with incremental carbon taxes (which are certainly the most efficient ways of changing behaviour), starting low and building up. If anyone can implement an effective cap-and-trade system (I somehow doubt this, given the pressures on politicians to dole out exemptions and subsidies alongside them), then let them try. Let's continue to fund the science, and make sure data are open and accurate. Let's step up efforts on monitoring (unbelievably, there is no better method of working out the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere than asking emitters what they are emitting – funding for direct sampling of the atmosphere is being cut at the time of writing<sup>37</sup>). And most important, if we find that others are free-riding on our efforts (and it can be absolutely guaranteed that someone will), then let's not retreat into cutting-off-nose-to-spite-face behaviour such as rolling back carbon reduction programmes or launching trade wars.

There are two clear conclusions. The first is that this is a long process which will never result in complete success, but which must be undertaken anyway. Our understanding of the risks will change over time, and so will conditions. Scientific, political, geopolitical and economic factors will predominate at different times, demanding different responses from different governments. National governments will have to do much of the work, but the responses of individuals matter too. There is no reason not to take action now, and every reason not to set policy for decades hence.

Secondly, there is no place in this for ideological back-and-forth. Americans who believe campaigns to promote low-energy light bulbs are the first step towards communism, and greens who get apoplectic about people who drive Porsches are equally polarising and divisive. Let's not pretend either that science is the only perspective that matters. In fact, the ideological stance that best meets the situation is conservatism, the rejection of radical change imposed from the top down. In a conservative polity, the individual matters, and so does the environment. The conservative's value pluralism speaks against the consumerist pursuit of material wealth and pleasure to the exclusion of all other drives. Economic growth is good, but

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Tony Lodge, *Wind Chill: Why Wind Energy Will Not Fill the UK's Energy Gap*, London: Centre for Policy Studies, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> 'Highs and lows', *The Economist*, 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2010.



should never be the only measure of well-being. Small-c conservatism is also rightly sceptical of the prospects of sweeping 'solutions' to complex problems.

Balance is the key. Let's move away from a carbon economy, but try to alleviate the pain if and when it arises. Let's experiment with, and even subsidise, new technology and renewable energy sources, but not so much as to distort the energy market too radically. Let's engage in international discussion, but not expect an unrealistic measure of agreement on methods. Let's try to approach this problem in a moral way, without imposing our morality on those who do not share it, and without rejecting the occasional grubby compromise (measures need above all to be effective – no point on focusing on the symbolic). Let's try to balance our own interests with those of our children and those of our grandchildren. Mainly, let's take the problem seriously and do whatever we can about it now, rather than waiting for agreement about what 7, 8 or 9 billion people in 200 countries should do for the next 50 years.

## Green conservatism: moral issues

Concern for the environment is a wrench for a democratic political party, not least because polar bears, unborn generations and tropical hardwoods do not vote. Those who claim an interest in environmental matters are often less interested in spending their own money and time on the issue, than in diverting other people's resources to those ends. Ultimately, selfish interests (*not* self-interest) kick in, and the green conservative (alongside any other committed green) must defend the environment against short-termism, despoliation and exploitation without a great deal of hope that a balancing set of interests can be mobilised electorally. They must rely on moral persuasion as opposed to electoral bribes. The final section of this chapter explores conservatives' grounds for hope that this can be achieved.

Balance is everything. Fixing on green issues and privileging green values above all others contradicts the conservative's insistence on politics as a means of negotiating across plurality, and her consequent disapproval of single issue campaigns. The risks involved of focusing entirely on the environment, of setting arbitrary targets to achieve within arbitrary timeframes, and of hoping for a radical change in human nature are simply too large to be considered. Balance needs to be achieved partly by taking other values into consideration, but also by ensuring that the interpretation of the environment used is human-centred. The green needs to ensure that a decent, aesthetically-pleasing and sustainable environment for humans exists, rather than kow-towing to a spurious 'Mother Nature' who trumps everything. Aesthetics are important; the representation of the landscape, as a human construction, gives it meaning. As Robert Macfarlane puts it:

The land itself, of course, has no desires as to how it should be represented. It is indifferent to its pictures and to its picturers. But maps organise information about a landscape in a profoundly influential way. They carry out a triage of its aspects, selecting and ranking those aspects in an order of importance, and so they create forceful biases in the ways a landscape is perceived and treated.<sup>38</sup>

As, he might have added, do poetry, science and photography.

Small-c conservatism exists in order to preserve human societies, to allow human self-expression and the pursuit of human self-interest, and to support human identity as embedded in the various communities in which we find ourselves, voluntarily and

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, London: Granta Books, 2007, 10.

involuntarily. To assert that, say, the Amazon rainforest matters more than the people in it is romantic and wrong, and will lead to its destruction (as rainforest dwellers certainly have a much more powerful say in its fate than do European, or even urban Brazilian, environmentalists). The job of the conservative is to find the language, images and policies to emphasise the aesthetic, economic and climatic benefits of the rainforest, and how these accrue to the population of the rainforest itself, as well as to the wider world. It is not easy, but it certainly cannot be achieved without compromise or negotiation.

Note also that the desideratum of justifying conservatism by public reason demands a humancentric point of view. Anything else is a type of special pleading which will not meet the public reason test; it will not appeal to those who are not already persuaded. Anyway, one should be suspicious of people who appoint themselves spokespersons for trees, forests, endangered animals or 'Gaia' – no-one voted for them, particularly not the objects they claim to represent.

The value of wilderness varies depending on where it is, what its preservation will cost and how wonderful it is (in other words, how accommodating to human values). Indeed, it has been argued that 'wilderness' *per se* has disappeared: 'little on Earth is remote anymore, and accelerating human pressures on the landscape threaten to overrun even specialized habitats.' 'From the most remote corners of the frozen Arctic to the darkest interiors of the Amazon's tropical rainforests, the impact of humanity now drives biological systems. What separates the Brazilian rainforest from New York's Adirondack Forest Preserve from Manhattan's Central Park is only a matter of degree.'<sup>39</sup> Especially in small, crowded nations, our notions of nature and wilderness need to be situated within a landscape already shaped by human hand. Macfarlane emphasises the diversity of 'logics of connection' between discrete parts of Britain and Ireland, yet such connections include human ones, alongside geological links, migration lines and movements of weather and light. Places were held together by 'the people, alive and dead, who had dwelled in or passed through the landscapes. A webbing of story and memory joined up my places, as well as other more material affinities.'<sup>40</sup> To take another example, Roger Deakin's study of wood and woodland worldwide is a story not only of wild woods, but managed forests, crafts ancient and modern, and even modern art.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Intergenerational justice***

One vitally important aspect of conservatism that pertains particularly to the environment is the idea, very prominent already in Burke's anti-contractarianism, of *intergenerational justice*, fairness not only to the living, but also the dead, and the yet-to-be-born. Concern for those who are not currently alive makes the conservative unique (greens do have a concern for the generations of the future, but are less interested in the dead).<sup>42</sup> Our current state depends upon history and context, which need to be sympathetically and honestly reported at least as much as present ideas and norms. Similarly, our own ultimate fate will depend upon the legacy we leave to future generations. There are many parts to this, including political constitutions,

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen M. Meyer, *The End of the Wild*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, 12, 8-9.

<sup>40</sup> Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, 314.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees*, London: Penguin, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 163.

economic conditions (including levels of debt),<sup>43</sup> scientific knowledge and artistic achievement, but the bequeathed environment is clearly central.

[O]ne of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth and its laws are consecrated, is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their prosperity, should act as if they were the entire masters; that they should not think it among their rights to cut off the entail, or commit waste upon the inheritance, by destroying at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society; hazarding to leave to those who come after them a ruin instead of a habitation – and teaching these successors as little to respect their contrivances, as they had themselves respected the institutions of their forefathers. By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways, as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer.<sup>44</sup>

Of course Burke is talking about political institutions here, but given the important role of the environment in history, memory, myth and understanding it is clear that it falls under his implicit scope. The past is something to which we should do justice, which should inform our moral views of ourselves. We have a duty to pass knowledge of it to future generations, who of course inherit our history.<sup>45</sup> By concentrating on these deep connections across 'the chain and continuity of the commonwealth', Burke transforms our view of politics from a narrow one based on the current generation which is always at risk of being overwhelmed by the fleeting requirements of the present moment. An extended group only makes political sense if it is understood through time.

Because a nation is not an idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation; but it is an idea of continuity which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space. And this is a choice not of one day or one set of people, not a tumultuary and giddy choice; it is a deliberate election of ages and of generations; it is a constitution made by what is ten thousand times better than choice, it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people which disclose themselves only in a long space of time.<sup>46</sup>

This assertion of the connectivity between past and future shows why international responses to address environmental concerns will not work, and that smaller political units can and should mobilise. Whereas, as I argued above, there is no serious chance of effective global action against climate change, the 'deliberate election of ages and generations' stands both as a more persuasive idea for today's generation of consumers and citizens, and as a means to influence actions and attitudes in the future (as is surely required). 'Inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a

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<sup>43</sup> For an interesting take on this in the non-environmental context, see David Willetts, *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – And Why They Should Give It Back*, London: Atlantic, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, 192-193.

<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Edmund Burke, 'Speech on a committee to inquire into the state of the representation of the Commons in Parliament', in Isaac Kramnick (ed.), *The Portable Edmund Burke*, New York: Penguin, 1999, 174-182, at 176-177.

sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement.<sup>47</sup> As the nineteenth-century jurist and American Senator Rufus Choate argued, if we teach that 'all the dead, the living, the unborn were one moral person', then 'the engagements of one age may bind the conscience of another.'<sup>48</sup>

It is a telling irony that defenders of social contract philosophy who wish to address environmental concerns end up using Burke's reasoning. Modern contractarian liberals, following John Rawls, argue that in order to choose a social contract both rationally and humanely, those negotiating it have to be hidden behind a 'veil of ignorance' which blinds them to their own condition (religion, gender, level of wealth, etc).<sup>49</sup> This is a somewhat odd notion to begin with, but those liberals who wish to apply the Rawlsian paradigm to the environment and other intergenerational concerns have to go further, and assume the contract 'generation blind' – i.e. one enters into it without even knowing whether one is alive, dead, or not yet born.<sup>50</sup> If not, the rational economic man, left to his own utility-maximising devices, will always divert resources from future generations to his own – the very ground of Burke's criticism of Rousseau's original contractarian arguments. The fact that even liberals have to echo Burke's devastating critique reveals conservatism as the ideology best placed to protect the environment.

Note the greater importance of thick ethical relations over thin moral ones, as the conservative has always claimed. Intergenerational justice is a spur for action only if we perceive a direct connection with those future generations. In such circumstances, 'it makes our weakness subservient to our virtue; it grafts benevolence even upon avarice.'<sup>51</sup> We would be much less inclined to act as responsible stewards for the environment if we were leaving it to an abstract future in some arbitrarily-defined state.

### ***Virtue and the environment***

It is unfortunate (and ultimately self-defeating) that conservatives historically and the political right generally have ignored the claims of the environment over the past two or three decades. The tragic irony is that conservatism is built for respect for the environment. Rule-based morality cannot hope to succeed in this space. Environmentalism, and its need for compromise and balance, depends upon the exercise of virtue, not the following of rules.<sup>52</sup> The most important virtue, vital for a conservative, has already been quoted in Burke: *mindfulness*, being mindful of one's duties to succeeding generations. One also needs to exercise care, humility, curiosity and honesty (especially if one is a scientist). One needs an aesthetic appreciation of what we have, and what might be lost, an ability to discriminate between what is

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<sup>47</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 119-120.

<sup>48</sup> Rufus Choate, 'The position and functions of the American bar, as an element of conservatism in the state', in Jerry Z. Muller (ed.), *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought From David Hume to the Present*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 155-166, at 156.

<sup>49</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, 136-142.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Clark Wolf, 'Intergenerational justice', in R.G. Frey & Christopher Heath Wellman (eds.), *A Companion to Applied Ethics*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 279-294, at 292. For a critique of contractarian accounts in the context of environmentalism, see Avner de-Shalit, *Why Posterity Matters: Environmental Policies and Future Generations*, London: Routledge, 1995, 87-111.

<sup>51</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 140.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Christie Davies, 'The environmental virtues', in Digby Anderson (ed.), *Decadence: The Passing of Personal Virtue and its Replacement By Political and Psychological Slogans*, London: Social Affairs Unit, 2005, 151-172.

valuable and what is not, an ability to compromise and broker between competing interests, a long-term rather than a short-term outlook, and a wider set of motivations than merely money. Furthermore, one needs the peculiarly conservative combination of scepticism (of technocratic claims to fashion and control the environment) and risk aversion, and its corollaries of tolerance of a plurality of values, and concern for intergenerational justice.

The single-value, rule-based approach to the environment often exacerbates the very problems it is meant to solve. For instance, one often wants to limit disruption caused by particular human actions or practices rather than eliminating them outright; one wants to provide incentives to do less damage (for example by securing property rights to wildlife, trees or land). The absolutism of ecologism is extremely problematic here because of a preference for banning damaging activities that could be limited and regulated, even though very often the enforcement of such bans is nigh on impossible.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, environments need to be managed, but this may require human intervention as the lesser of two evils. Disasters may have to happen as part of the cycle of renewal, such as the fires that are important events in our environmental history. The efforts of forestry managers to eliminate fire have led to the unintended consequence of a build-up of undergrowth so that those fires that do take hold are far more dreadful, threatening not only woodland but also human habitation.<sup>54</sup>

Another vice of ecologism is the pursuit of symbolic victories, as opposed to the more utilitarian focus on what will work. Adam Smith's strategy of trying to motivate socially-valuable behaviour via incentives that speak to self-interest rather than finer feelings is anathema to radical greens. The result of ignoring self-interest is *dependence* on finer feelings, which is not a happy position to be in.

Meanwhile, those who are neglectful of the environment and prepared to oversee its degradation bring opposite vices into the political equation. These include excessive individualism detrimental to the good functioning of the community, single-value politics focused around money and the Gross National Product, and an insistence (shared with radical greens) on judging all situations by unvarying criteria.

It remains for the conservative to bring environmental issues to the fore, making them a routine part of political discourse, while also making it clear that 'environment' means different things to different people and groups, and that it is meaningless to pursue a single, simple 'policy'. The language of balance, risk aversion and scepticism should be used to broker between different groups and their incommensurable economic and aesthetic interests.

Only the conservative can do this. This is her opportunity to claim a vital role in tomorrow's politics, and may also be the best hope for the preservation of the environment as a pleasant, liveable human domain.

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<sup>53</sup> It is one of those bizarre ironies of politics that those on the left who want to ban deforestation or hunting use very similar arguments to those on the right who want to preserve bans on drugs, despite their evident and extremely damaging failure. Each side is a mirror image, and each seems determined not to learn from the ludicrous absolutism of the other. To reiterate an earlier message, the conservative prefers regulation to banning.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Juli G. Pausas & Jon E. Keeley, 'A burning story: the role of fire in the history of life', *BioScience*, 59(7), 2009, 593-601.