



Policy Study No. 72

Greening the Tories

new policies on the environment

Andrew Sullivan



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES



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Introduction

Dear Sir,

Despite the stories of violence and strife, that fill the newspapers, I am pleased to be able to report that the true spirit of England survives. I quote with permission from the Antrobus village news, July edition.

Post Box 126, near the corner of Nutford Road and Pole Lane. A pair of blue-tits made their home there this spring and raised a family. They have now flown away and letters can once again be posted. The Arly postmen, Fred, Bob and Jim would like to say thank you to everyone for their co-operation.

Yours faithfully,

D.B. Gresham

The Times, Monday 29 July 1985.

THIS STUDY SPRINGS FROM WHAT HAS BEEN FASHIONABLY REGARDED AS A NEUROSIS. Let me label this 'neurosis' as the nervous, defensive, even backward-looking search for a 'new Englishness'. It has a suitably journalistic and sociological ring about it.

How does this 'new Englishness' express itself? There have been several ephemeral suggestions: architectural anti-modernism, anti-Americanism, Imperial nostalgia (from *Chariots of Fire* to *The Jewel in the Crown*), defence of red telephone boxes and pound notes, and opposition to the cultural revolution that economic change seems to be bringing about.

To one coming from abroad, it has a strikingly nervous and parochial character, as if the country were permanently looking back to console itself with nostalgia for the glory that is no longer there. That, at least, is how Americans most readily explain the contemporary atmosphere in Britain.

My contention in this study is that the Americans, the journalists and the sociologists have got it wrong. This 'new Englishness' is not new at all; this attachment to the past and national culture is not a sudden aberration; this respect for what we have been is perfectly in keeping with our national temperament. It could be described as a 'neurosis' only by the neurotic.

My second contention is that this cultural and intellectual conservatism is not and has never been an enemy of change and renewal; indeed, that it is a prerequisite for securely based advance. We have to know who we are to know who we may be. Moreover, it

has been the escape from this self-knowledge, the reckless pursuit of a doctrinally modern, futurist and radical outlook that has typified a period of national decline. Our 'new Englishness' is a sign of health, a return to normality, which bodes well for sustainable economic and cultural renewal.

But perhaps the most curious feature of this 'new Englishness' has been its concern with our physical surroundings. Our country is tangible, physical, definable in thousands of small but significant ways. The buildings and streets in our towns, the avenues and hedgerows of our countryside, our heavy coins and old signposts, red telephone boxes and sash windows have become suddenly articulated again, as they have come under threat. It is not for the first time that these sentiments have been heard but their urgency and concern have become noticeably more acute.

Surely if this country is at all 'green', then these sentiments are the most fundamental elements of our green consciousness. A further study of the history of English environmental concern reveals the same themes: a concern with the small, immediate details of our lives, with gardens and trees, with hedgerows and wild flowers, with comfortable buildings that we have come to love, and beyond this, with a developing myth about the national identity which is bound up with all these things. There is no evidence of some sweeping, Teutonic paranoia, or of alternative-lifers concerned with the future of the ozone-layer having anything but the mildest influence on popular culture and attitudes. To be English and to be green has often also been to be conservative. That is a thought which casts suggestive shadows over our present attitudes.

Green Roots

The garden

One of the most distinctive sights of modern England, to a traveller returning from abroad, is the occasional spot in the middle of a small town, or even in the centre of a sprawling city, which is given over to allotments. It is, at first glance, an unsightly mess: lean-to sheds dotted around a jungle of runner-bean canes, perspex cloches for seedlings, plant labels poking up at the end of rows of heaped earth and the occasional, distracting rustle of milk bottle tops poised over the tomatoes. Dahlias and chrysanthemums rub shoulders with more rigorously practical plants, and it is possible over a period of time to catch the occasional suburbanite stopping for a moment just to look at them and take them in. Lawrence diagnosed that moment in the Nottinghamshire collier, escaping from the wife and possessiveness, into 'that odd, remote sort of contemplation which shows a real awareness of the presence of beauty'. Orwell picked out the moment as somehow typical of the English character. Love of flowers was not an example of European aestheticism, nor some retreat into the primitive depths of nature. It was much more connected with,

the privateness of English life. We are a nation of flower-lovers, but we are also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts players, crossword-puzzle fans.¹

Insights such as these may help us to understand a little more clearly the peculiar aspects of the English 'green' outlook. It is radically different from its continental counterparts. It is linked with the 'safe', not with Rousseauian extremities, with privacy, not national forest worship, and with property. The garden brings together these themes, not simply in the context of modern urban England but throughout our history.

The first gardening 'boom' lies as far back as the seventeenth century. Keith Thomas goes so far as to add 'to all the other revolutions of the early modern period, another one: the Gardening Revolution'.² Even at the very beginning of the sixteenth century, Thomas More's *Utopia* describes what we have come to associate almost exclusively with twentieth-century gardening associations. It is one of this keen amateur gardener's most prescient passages:

The Utopians are extremely fond of these gardens in which they grow fruit, including grapes, as well as grass and flowers. They keep them in

wonderful condition – in fact I've never seen anything to beat them for beauty and fertility. The people of Aircastle are keen gardeners, not only because they enjoy it, but because there are inter-street competitions for the best-kept garden.

Garden centres began in the Tudor period and Tudor herbals reveal a large amount of ordinary amateur involvement (its foundations in small gardens, kitchen gardens), so that in 1500 there were perhaps 200 kinds of cultivated plant in England. By 1839, these had increased to 18,000. John Worlidge pointed out the way in which, characteristically, gardening has been one of the most widely spread pastimes among every social class: in 1677, he claimed, there was 'scarce a cottage in most parts of England but hath its proportionable garden, so great a delight do men take in it'. Miss Blanche Henry's recent cataloguing of gardening books shows 19 published in the sixteenth century, 20 in the first half of the seventeenth, 80 in the second half and 600 in the eighteenth.

The history of English gardening is in itself a subject of enormous scope and complexity, which few other countries could match. But its widespread popularity, its allotments, and above all its working-class roots are perhaps unique. Keith Thomas has even observed that 'the preoccupation with gardening, like that with pets, fishing and other hobbies, even helps to explain the relative lack of radical and political impulses among the English proletariat'.³ Could it be that this part of our 'green' consciousness reveals itself, not as some origin of radical alternative philosophy but as the continuous manifestation of a quiet and conservative culture?

Trees

*The trees are coming into leaf
like something almost being said.*⁴

It was difficult in the middle of the national grief about the spread of Dutch Elm disease not to believe that the English have a particular fondness for their woods, copses, avenues and trees. A brief glimpse at the letters to the Editor of *The Times* also reveals emotions apparently out of all proportion to their objects of concern. The destruction of a large and old hedgerow some 30 feet high provoked intense reactions: 'The first that the people living in the farmhouse next to the hedge knew of the impending disaster was when they heard the chainsaws

start to whine at 9.30 in the morning. What has been done feels to the distressed residents like an act of grievous bodily harm. One of them was so physically affected that she was unable to set foot outside the house for a week.'⁵ Trees, it seems, are not simply large outcrops of vegetation: they become part of our lives as individuals and in society. Their life-spans mirror ours; the tree which we remember in childhood is still with us in our later years, a reminder of our own ageing and a consolation in it. We feel grief at the felling of a tree either because it has become part of our sense of a particular place, with its memories and associations, or because we see the cruelty of the vicious destruction of an investment of all those quiet years of organic growth, of hibernation and renewal, of almost human development. What right do we have to uproot the creation of decades? What human whim can justify such an act of traumatic change? And the older the tree, the more painful the destruction. It is difficult to think of an example which more successfully convinces ordinary people of the cogency of Burke's cautions against abstract interference in the natural order of slow development. The tree has acquired a right to continue merely by continuing to live and grow.

Are these sentiments new, a product of a decadent and over-sensitive urban and intellectual culture, divorced from natural necessities? Certainly the early deforestation of England which made us the most scantily wooded country in Europe by the beginning of the twentieth century is not a testimony to such nice sensibilities. But recognition of the need for economic conservation of timber appears in Tudor and Yorkist statutes, following the rationale put by James I in 1610: 'If woods be suffered to be felled, as daily they are, there will be none left.' There is a devastating logic here which would perhaps be of some use in the context of the policy decisions which we still have to take.

John Evelyn's tree-planting proposals in his 1664 *Sylva* did not emerge in an historical vacuum, either, but could draw on centuries of experience of coppice and woodland management in monasteries and private estates, as is well testified in the small print of early lease arrangements. Trees were also conserved for more than mere timber and could represent a family's history or tradition on an estate, as the Spencers' oak tree date-stones at Althorp testify as early as 1567. The beauty of the English hedgerow was observed by foreign tourists under the Tudors, and the Norwich of the period was described as 'either a city in an orchard or an orchard in a city, so equally are houses

and trees planted'. The first outcries over the State's felling of timber based on aesthetic grounds were under James I. We seem in short, to have been here before.

But the key objections were not simply aesthetic. As we have seen, the very size and age of trees give them a social and cultural significance which gardens or small, ephemeral plants cannot have: they have an ability to stretch beyond the private into the public arena and therefore engage wider emotions and principles. They could be a sign of social power: between 1760 and 1835 at least 50 million trees were planted both for timber and to enhance the imposing qualities of houses and estates. A tree could symbolise a cause and give it abiding credibility, from the 'tree of reformation' of the 1549 East Anglian rebels to the Tolpuddle shrine of the Trade Union Movement; both examples, interestingly, of how such objects could have meaning for all strata of society.⁶ The felling of a tree also brings into focus questions of political and legal importance: does it belong to the land it is on or the people who are attached to it? As a Scottish landlord declared in the early nineteenth century, 'A noble tree is in some measure a matter of public concern; nor ought its proprietor be allowed wantonly to strip his county of his fairest ornament.' Fanshawe, in the troubled mid-seventeenth century, saw a political and social dimension to trees when he urged the gentry of the county to plant trees and 'see them shoote up with your children'. Marvell saw in them a moral quality sanctioning property:

*For they ('tis credible) have sense,
As we, of love and Reverence,
And underneath the Courser Rind
The Genius of the house do bind.*

What is important in all these observations is that trees, as much else in the natural world, cannot be easily compartmentalised into the realm of 'natural history'. They are part of our social and political history, just as today they have more than narrow 'environmental' importance and touch, whether we like it or not, questions of much wider cultural and political significance. They represent moreover a sense of continuity and cultural unity that conservatives might do well not to ignore. They show, perhaps, in microcosm, the combination of renewal and stability which we seem so much in search of:

*Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.⁷*

Buildings

Alongside More's gardening competitions, another striking feature of Utopian society is resistance to sudden demolition of buildings. More bases his argument on economic grounds, reminiscent of the hand-out from some contemporary conservationist society:

The reason why the building trade usually absorbs so much labour is that people put up houses which their improvident heirs allow to tumble down. So the next generation has to start building all over again, which costs infinitely more than it would have cost to keep the original house standing.

More here is criticising the permanent upheaval of rebuilding and demolition which he saw in the London of his day, and favours a more cautious approach, which might be seen as prevailing in English urban planning until the upheavals of the Victorians. Wren, we should remember, was turned down.

Several reasons could be seen as lying behind a tradition of cautious rebuilding: the demands of complex networks of private property for one, and economic thrift for another. But as with trees, there is an important social and cultural dimension to architecture which has long been recognised.

For examples, we need look no further than the sixteenth century with the first great centralised attempt at altering the physical and architectural environment for ideological reasons: the Henrician and Edwardian Reformation. The centrally imposed spoliation of parish churches and the monasteries was an attack on a social unity which lay behind mere architectural fabric. Churches were a part of a community's identity not least because many of them were actual products of a community's own labour and wealth. The fifteenth century had seen a major communal effort at church rebuilding throughout the country with the involvement of every section of society. Individual families donated a bewildering variety of altar stones, icons, lamps, statues and even whole windows and towers, while poorer folk often contributed by free donation of manual labour. The result was a gradual accretion of beauty, which belonged to all sorts of individuals and families on a plethora of levels. It was a manifestation as J.J. Scarisbrick recently put it, of a community's 'integrity, continuity and wealth'. Recent scholarship is continuing to discover the depth of emotions unleashed by the ideological attack on such a social achievement, which is strikingly reminiscent of much of the reactions in postwar Britain to the ideological rebuilding of our

immediate surroundings.⁸ History again reveals the depth of this English sensitivity and sense of communal and architectural place.

Buildings, then, are political and cultural entities which touch directly the fabric of everyone's lives. A defence of an old rood-screen in the sixteenth century was a defence of a way of life under threat, and a political position. Certainly the authorities interpreted it as such. William Laud's restoration of much Church paraphernalia in the 1630s was interpreted also as a political statement, as was the opposition to it. Modern vicars gutting old vestries and installing toilets are also saying something beyond the niceties of architectural alteration, just as the futurist tower-blocks of the 1950s and '60s carried with them a whole assortment of social and political theories. How we want society to be is neatly reflected in how we want society to look. Victorian sentiments of anti-industrialism found their expression in the architecture of the period; garden city pioneers reacted in the same way, inspired by dreams of pre-industrial innocence, epitomised in the English village; the Gothic revival could be seen as a resurrection of medieval ruralism against what the son-in-law of the Marquis of Salisbury conceived as 'the haughty and Protestantised shopocracy'; even the 'bypass Tudor' of the inter-war ribbon development can be seen as a political and cultural statement against the very urban society which sustained the people who lived in it. Apart from the fact of the inextricability of architecture from the political and social realm of debate, what these examples show is also how consistently the English have sought to rekindle in their architecture a vision of England which is profoundly opposed to the urban and industrial society that by the nineteenth century we had become. It should come as no surprise that these same sentiments were at the root of the earliest architectural preservation movements as well.

The Society for the Preservation of Old Buildings was set up in 1877 and found a ready and responsive audience. The impulse was a profound cultural pessimism, in which the salvage of the past remained the only hope:

Its object is not even artistic, but historical; to preserve what is left of the past in the most indiscriminate way. Whether good or bad, old or new, preserve it all

as the architect Robert Kerr put it in 1884. All this went hand in hand with anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism and anti-modernism which linked romantic Left with aristocratic Right in an unholy alliance only vaguely mirrored in contemporary politics:

... some of us appear to be trying to turn England into another America – for ever scheming railways where they are not wanted, cutting down trees, and clearing away old dwelling places, and insulting even the green fields with advertisements. Anything that interferes with extra percentages is as dust in the balance to such

as Walter Crane put it in the *Socialist Illustrator*. When we talk about architecture, we talk about our vision of the country itself. And, in the English context, the architecture which has been recently popular and the vision which has inspired it have both had a distinctly green tinge. The paradise of the English village is an image which is with us still.

The wider countryside

The transformation of English sensibility from Hamlet's condemnation of the 'unweeded garden that grows to seed' to an aesthetic appreciation of the wilderness was neither rapid nor ever fully complete. The English can still be divided by those who are appalled at a hearty, bearded ecologist jumping cheerily into a Lancashire spring and those who wouldn't mind joining in. For all the millions of ramblers and gardeners, there are still, thankfully, plenty with the commonsense of Dr Johnson's observation, 'that was the best garden which produced most roots and fruits; and that water was most to be prized which contained most fish'.

But the growth of the naturalist ethic, of the need to preserve nature in its raw and uncultivated state is too strong a feature of English culture to be ignored. From the seventeenth century onwards, the English sought rural refuge from their sprawling towns, into a whole range of rural leisure pursuits not wholly restricted to the aristocracy. The country's angling tradition is extraordinarily strong: by 1653 *The Compleat Angler* brought out the first of its subsequent 400 editions and today, over three million coarse anglers testify to the durability of the sport. The eighteenth century brought with it too a reaction against what Burke described in an early work as the orderliness of the 'Beautiful', in favour of the grandeur, fear and unease of the 'Sublime'. The hordes pouring into the Lake District by the 1760s testify to the growing popularity of the rural wilderness.

The root of these sentiments arouse contemporary interest and concern. Are such enterprises part of a Rousseauian anti-social escapism, or simply another excuse for a social outing? Can natural beauty untouched by human hands be a celebration of human society or a condemnation of it? Such an argument, though, is largely academic – there is no such thing in England as countryside

'unmanaged' – it is all designated for some human use, and as much part of the man-made environment as any town or city. Moreover, the evidence of some great psychological trauma being behind such naturalist outings is extremely thin: such outings show all the marks of a healthy country at play. John Stuart Mill defended it in this way:

Solitude in the sense of being often alone . . . is essential to any depth of meditation or of character . . . Solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without.

This commonsense is given extra credence by the very nature of the English countryside itself. It has none of the manic extremes of the Schwarzwald or the near-fascist sentiments which it might arouse and still arouses in some Germans. Here is a key difference between the much publicised German 'green conscience' and the virtually ignored English 'green sensibility'. G.M. Trevelyan perhaps understood the appeal and nature of the English rural environment better than anyone, as he expressed it in his 1929 essay, 'Must England's Beauty Perish?':

Common English scenery, whether of the Home Counties, of the South West or of the Midlands, is a delicate and fugitive beauty, made up of small touches, a combination of nature with the older arts of man in a harmony which can be easily destroyed by a few rash strokes of the crude, levelling machinery of modern life.

The English rural sensitivity is, then, linked to the safe and the accessible, in marked contrast with the German tradition. It is more likely to soothe than to arouse. It is concerned with the closest as well as the most remote. English conservation began in parks or rivers where swans could be 'preserved for their beauty' as at Abbotsbury in Dorset since medieval times, or in the Thames in the very centre of the capital, whose records reveal the first use of the word 'conservacie' to apply to the fish within it. Natural history in England has an essentially local and amateur base, which encounters nature in backyards and local meadows, rather than in the remote wildernesses. By 1800, for instance, all but five of the known English butterflies had been discovered and recorded, a glowing testimony to the enthusiasm and curiosity of our ancestors and to their delight in their natural surroundings.

This may appear odd in a fundamentally urban nation, but it is precisely the urban condition which seems to have spurred such rural nostalgia. The more separated from the countryside we have become,

the more attached to the idea of it we find ourselves. It is perhaps even simpler than that. Urban life creates tensions which a rural outlet can soothe and cure. We may return to Lawrence's collier: 'He escaped. He roved the countryside with his dog, prowling for a rabbit, for nests, for mushrooms, anything. He loved the countryside, just the indiscriminating feel of it, or he loved just to sit on his heels and watch – anything or nothing. He was not interested in facts, but in a flow'.⁹

The green and pleasant land

John Bull was ceasing to be a countryman, and a farmer; when once he was wholly urbanised or suburbanised, would he any longer be John Bull, except in the cartoons of *Punch*?

G.M. Trevelyan's *English Social History* from which these words come, was published at a time when some sort of national re-appraisal was unavoidable: during the Second World War. Like George Orwell at the same time, it is striking how even in that ideological context, the image of England as a rolling, green pasture stays uppermost in commentators' minds. This may well have been an accurate reflection of very common sentiment. The pioneering polling organisation, 'Mass Observation' conducted a survey in 1941 on 'What England means to you?' and saw that green fields, villages and a simple rural way of life far outstripped any more profound appreciation of 'freedom' or 'democracy' or even the Crown. It was all perhaps a culmination of the success of what Martin Wiener in his study, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, called the 'Southern Metaphor' of England in popular self-perception. This metaphor saw England in terms of an idyllic rural past, traditional, unchanging and comforting, as opposed to a more realistic Northern metaphor of industrial power and engineering, technological expertise. He has noted how even the most successful Northern industrialists saw their goal as a profoundly anti-industrial rural retreat, so endemic was the connection between social success and a leisured, landed, rural gentry. Even as we attained the peak of our industrial success, our culture and attitudes saw such success as mere dross. This national schizophrenia, he argues with some conviction, is the key to our growing disenchantment with industrial growth and society as the twentieth century progressed. Our heart simply was not in it.

Even now, perhaps especially now, it is true to say, as David White reflected in 1974, 'there is a corner of the English mind that is forever Ambridge'. It is difficult to explain without this analysis, the

continuing success of such cultural phenomena as *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, *All Creatures Great and Small*, *To the Manor Born*, *The Good Life* and *Watership Down*, all of which have attained enormous popular acclaim. In no other country in the world would it be possible to devote 40 minutes of peak viewing time to the oddly repetitive sight of dogs chasing sheep up Welsh hillsides, as has now happened for several years on BBC2's programme, *One Man and his Dog*. Perhaps it has something particularly to do with national tension – many of the phenomena I have just mentioned sprang from the anxieties of the 1970s and it took the Abdication Crisis to provoke this panegyric from Philip Gibbs:

There is still the English countryside, where life goes on traditionally in old farmsteads and small villages. There are the cathedral cities where time stands still, and where there is tranquillity of mind. In the old market towns, the young farmers who come in with their sheep and cattle belong to Hardy's England, and their minds follow the same furrows. Their blood is the same. Their character has not been changed much by modern fretfulness and 'nerves'.

This piece stands as a great testament to the powers of the imagination. I am particularly fond of the 'their minds follow the same furrows' bit, as if by using rural metaphors the rural illusion might come closer to existing. But illusions are important in the political life of nations, often having more significance than a battery of statistics. Could such rural nostalgia be at least part of a cultural explanation for Britain's industrial slide?

An apposite element here is the English cult of the country house. Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, which again found such a spontaneously positive public reception in the 1980s, almost sees the ruin of the country house as a symbol of England's cultural decline, submerged in the Age of Hooper. It was a symbol which Nigel Dennis memorably articulated in his 1955 novel, *Cards of Identity*:

This sort of house was once a heart and centre of national identity. A whole world lived in relation to it. Millions knew who they were by reference to it. Hundreds of thousands look back to it, and not only grieve for its passing but still depend on it, non-existent though it is, to tell them who they are.

This rural element of the national identity makes conservation inevitably a defence not merely of the countryside, or of the past, but of the nation itself. When we defend hedgerows, we are really defending England. As E.M. Forster put it:

Houses, houses houses! You came from them and you must go back to them. Houses and bungalows, hotels, restaurants and flats, arterial roads, by-passes, petrol pumps and pylons – are these going to be England? Are these man's final triumph? Or is there another England, green and eternal, which will outlast them?

The phenomenon crosses party boundaries. Orwell's emotions in his novel *Coming Up For Air* are unmistakable, wishing at one point property developers 'the pox in their guts'. Dalton included the following in his Budget speech of 1946:

There is still a wonderful, incomparable beauty in Britain, in the sunshine on the hills, the mists adrift the moors, the wind on the downs, the deep peace of the woodland, the wash of the white, unconquerable cliffs which Hitler never scaled. There is beauty and history in all these places.

These sentiments, this national self-perception, these emotions, are, as we have seen, no accident. They draw on deep cultural roots in the history of our country. We are and have long been a 'green' nation, although not in the sense that the word has recently acquired. The reason for much antipathy to 'greening' England, is the fearful suspicion that it would entail the importation and imposition of an alien and hostile set of intellectual and moral beliefs. It need not. Rather, a sensitive approach to our cultural past and present reveals that England is already 'greened', in her own traditions and in her own way. Understanding those traditions is the key to developing them and bringing them to fruition. And it is in that process that conservatives have a considerable head-start.

Green Conservatism

Property

It may seem the ultimate in absurdity to suggest that a healthier and more protected environment can be achieved only through the actual rolling back of centralised State control, but in one area this is surely the case. The extension of property ownership, arguably the only credible radical achievement of the present Government, has gone hand in hand with more organised and more rational popular defence of environmental balance. The most rigorous opponent of a new housing development is the mortgaged inhabitant of the last one; the most responsible voices in the countryside are those who may wish to hand some of it on to their children. Owning property makes us more sensitive to the particular and varied demands of a specific place, it gives us a stake in a neighbourhood, makes us part of its history and its beauty. We put down 'roots'. Or as Aristotle definitively put it in the *Politics*,

What is common to the greatest number is cared for least. Men think principally of what is their own, and if they have the common interest at heart, it is only to the extent that they are personally concerned therein.

The extension of property-ownership is the best way to combine human nature with environmental protection, to create proper and enduring links between people and their surroundings and to protect our towns and countryside, just as the extension of share-ownership is the most effective way to ensure that wealth creation is responsive to the society in which it works.

The alternative is the beneficent man from Whitehall, imposing his version of what the country should look like; or even worse, the man from the Royal Institute of British Architects, imposing *his* version of what the country should look like. The history of the environment since the war is likely to make us at least wary of the effects of centralised control over our surroundings. Central beneficence gave us the tower-blocks of the fifties and sixties and the Common Agricultural Policy of the seventies. The caring State of the post-war period lacked both the ability to curb the irresponsibility of property-speculators (the obverse of responsible property-owners) and the intellectual courage to resist the tired doctrines of modernist planning and architecture. Oxbridge funk did as much for our environment as it did for our economy and the danger of abandoning our environment to it is the

danger of any Establishment control. It ultimately does not care about what it is supposed to protect. As Henry Fairlie put it in 1959,

The one significant fact about the Establishment is that it represents nothing in the national life. It has its roots in no class and no interest; it responds to no deep-seated national instinct.¹⁰

The State's most constructive and least pernicious role might be to take a back seat and allow individuals to defend their own environment rather than let anyone do it for them. It can of course provide legal weapons and even financial or fiscal incentives to help the process along, just as it has so successfully managed to do in the trades union field, but it should avoid the temptations of cultural or environmental dictatorship. This would provide a far more secure, long-term foundation for the protection of our surroundings. Interested individuals on the spot can also be considerably more vigilant than a disinterested civil servant several miles away.

Property is linked with responsibility and responsibility must be the keynote of our protection of the environment. The more we are property-owners, the more direct our responsibility – and the better such protection. From there, we can perhaps broaden the perspective and persuade responsible, free individuals of their responsibility for the wider world as well. It is after all irresponsible, even immoral, to treat our national and international resources as immediately dispensable, to abandon our responsibility to the generations who are yet to come, to see the world as another consumer durable which will never run out and which can be used merely for our immediate personal and material gratification. This touches questions of morality which it is unfashionable to raise in contemporary political discussions but it is disturbing that conservatives should refrain from a moral perspective. As T.S. Eliot observed,

A wrong attitude towards nature implies somewhere a wrong attitude towards God, and the consequence is an inevitable doom. For a long enough time we have believed in nothing but the values arising in a mechanised, commercialised, urbanised way of life: it would be as well for us to face the permanent conditions upon which God allows us to live upon this earth.¹¹

Community

Community is now, of course, a term identified most readily, in Britain at least, with the rhetoric of the far Left. We all belong to a community: black, gay, élite or otherwise. Communities have community leaders,

and communities have community identity. We know because community leaders never stop telling us.

For others, though, the word is subtler than that, and the ideas that it conveys can be of far more value than the lobbying tricks of Labour Party activists. For conservatives, for example, the sign of a real community is perhaps when it does not feel the need to call itself one. It may not even be articulated, and although it may exist in conditions of considerable poverty and degradation, it may well not bristle with the anger of its self-appointed spokespersons. It will even find quiet strength in its reticent customs and habits. It need be neither exclusive nor exhaustive, with unarticulated communities within it and encompassing it. It may take the formal shape of a local football team, a company or a street; or it may simply exist in the mutual recognition of regular nightclubbers, the occasional smiles of a group of women at daily Mass, or even the solidarity of young unemployment. At its most powerful level, it may aspire to national identity aroused by an attack from without, finding words to express sentiments which before needed hardly to be said; at others, it may have all the characteristics of what the Left wishes was class-hatred but which too often expresses itself as class-pride.

My point about these communities is quite simple: they should be left alone. It is impossible to explain them intellectually without sounding faintly ridiculous, or fit them into an ideological structure which does not ultimately demean their dignity and simplify their contradictions. Of all temperaments, the conservative one will find this task of political self-denial the most natural.

This has an important environmental repercussion. Communities invariably, though not always, exist in a particular physical environment which gives substance and support to their continuation. School buildings become at times inseparable from what it means to belong to a school; the familiar curves and lines of brick and stone inextricable from the community of a street; the old town hall indistinguishable from the identity of a town, or a row of beeches an integral part of a village's self-perception. When we destroy or uproot such apparently harmless, irrelevant articles, we destroy more than the things themselves. We destroy the bonds that people have made with them; we destroy parts of people, their history, their sense of belonging, their community. Is a tiny increase in the abstract statistical 'maximisation of utility' an exchange which we can casually make for these things? What do human beings, what do *we* need more?

The minimum response that we can make to these reflections is to develop a sensitivity to the unspoken and fragile communities in our midst in the course of all policy decisions. That means at least an understanding, if not a defence, of all those elements which give structure and support to those communities: the human clutter of small streets, odd buildings, and countryside that frustrates the uniform demands of cash-crop prairie. Conservative government will wish to protect these details from whichever threat appears the most immediate: the abuse of private or public power, or the insensitive demands of the naked balance sheet. The State here is defending the lifestyle of a diverse and free society, providing legal means to arbitrate clashes of interest which yet protect the weak against the strong. Underlying this is the knowledge that a healthy society, and a cohesive society, needs to protect the communities in its midst from unwarranted disruption or obliteration, or face the barrenness of atomised, materialist emptiness. In any case, responsible use of freedom will not attack the ways of life which give meaning to what we would like to call our national culture. The right to be free has always to be tempered with the human need to belong. By elevating the former against the latter, freedom itself will become discredited, and the more radical alternatives come to seem at least less traumatic than the sweeping destruction of a national way of life.

History

I am by nature and instinct Conservative, loving old things because they are old and hating new ones merely because they are new. There is no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all those generations of mankind who are to follow us.

John Ruskin's sentiments expressed here in 1856 find an echo in many people who, like him, would never dream of becoming paid-up members of the Conservative Party. For most people, history is not an academic subject nor even an excursion into the realms of the BBC2 'classic' serial but a constant reaction with things, places, buildings and people who were here before us, which helps us to understand a little more clearly who we are. In our own lives we are intensely historical, amassing photograph albums, keeping old letters, writing diaries and visiting old haunts in a constant turning over of the pages of our lives. In our national life, the same process inevitably takes place. We visit

old houses, castles, parks, museums and churches, and even despite the steadfast refusal of modern historians to produce anything vaguely readable, consume a vast amount of historical trivia and literature. Even without making any deliberate effort, the past impinges itself upon us in a whole variety of mundane ways: the old lamp post, the worn coin, a forgotten wall plaque, a sudden turn in the street unleashing a wave of reminiscence. History exists as a continuous process, situating us, comforting us, directing us. Hazlitt remarked how love of the countryside curiously made us reflect on our personal history, since a flower we catch sight of at fifty can seem the same as the one we knew as a child. As G.M. Trevelyan put it,

It is indeed in the depths of the natural wilderness that a man feels most united to his ancestors, for there he is for a moment withdrawn from the present noisy age, left alone with nature as his fathers were left alone amid the same green sights and quiet sounds.¹²

Once again it is striking how inextricable and complementary are our urban and rural environments: both draw us back to our past, but in different ways, both leading us to a richer sense of a personal and communal inheritance.

Conservatives have always seen history as central to any self-confident society. The teaching of history in schools is curiously a subject of as yet little public concern, though its effects may be just as profound as the collapse in the teaching of the language. The preservation of our environment is then a key element of any conservative defence of the historical sense of the nation. The alternative is some dangerously escapist society in which, as Newman described it,

Nothing has a drift or a relation; nothing has a history or a promise. Everything stands by itself, and comes and goes in its turn, like the shifting scenes of a show, which leaves the spectator where he was.¹³

It is a prospect too close to our present reality to allow us to contemplate its further approach with any equanimity.

Beauty

Here is far more tricky ground. Who can decide what is beautiful? How can you possibly bring the esoteric concept of beauty into a political world of hard-nosed economic calculations?

In response to these challenges, I would simply point out that there is enormous public consensus, if not about what is beautiful,

then about what is ugly. And modern England is ugly, and ugly in a monotonous, insidious way that can hardly mean that as an issue it can be dead. Most people live in conditions not merely of shabby, unimaginative tawdriness, but of increasingly shabby, unimaginative tawdriness. Any glance at the mess of our major cities and towns, or the scrubby outskirts even of picture postcard villages reveals the greying, grubby mediocrity of our surroundings. Even what is beautiful is polluted by noise and by the unceasing pressure of the motor exhaust. England is uglier today than it has ever been. As our standard of living has gone up, the quality of life has plummeted. Even abolishing smog has only revealed the horrors of our post-war rebuilding more clearly.

And here I feel a sense of mild embarrassment. No doubt I am being too 'simplistic', or raising a subject which is curiously unacceptable, largely because it does not easily fit into the current political battle-lines, or because it does not conform to an easy solution. It is, of course, remarkably unsophisticated to put it in so simple a way. The Left sees only economics and the Right would rather ignore it, help the profits of the House Builders' Federation, or alternatively compose monographs on Sir Reginald Blomfield with a sigh of composed resignation. Yet the emergence of the 'first slum of Europe' is something which directly affects almost every individual in the country, except those lucky enough to buy an escape to the dwindling number of oases left. Why should this issue not be one on which considerable public support could be engendered, given the right rhetoric and leadership from above? It does not need an aesthete to do it: indeed such an approach could be very counter-productive. What is needed is an articulation of the ordinary person's instinctive sense of physical beauty so that he can demand the measures and standards necessary for revival. Perhaps another Stanley Baldwin, who knew a political nerve when he touched it:

It is the wealth and the glory of England, this beauty which has been saved through the centuries. There could be nothing more disastrous, nothing more wicked on our part, than to waste it, to dissipate it, and to destroy in our profligacy a priceless and irreplaceable heritage.¹⁴

We live in a century, after all, whose most popular poet was one who brilliantly expressed these sentiments and who understood the peculiarly English appreciation of a 'sense of place'. Betjeman's approach is unmistakable: *When all our roads are lighted/By concrete monsters sited/Like gallows overhead,/Bathed in the yellow vomit/Each*

*monster belches from it, 'We'll know that we are dead.'*¹⁵

It is either a failure of nerve or of imagination or probably both that has led us to be so curiously acquiescent in the spread of ugliness and cheapness that Betjeman has forever commemorated. Conservatives, of all people, might be expected to have an understanding of society which stretches beyond the merely economic, and their strange silence about such important cultural concerns is one of the more disturbing features of their post-war development. The rhetoric of the 1949 statement of party policy is clear enough:

Man is a spiritual creature adventuring on an eternal destiny, and science, politics, or economics are good or bad so far as they help or hinder the soul on its immortal journey. This is an age of change – but there are unchanging truths and, in such times as ours, it is above all things necessary to keep these before our eyes.

This, ironically, was the statement of policy of a party about to engage on the most shameless materialist binge in its history.

The Economic Objection

However sympathetic many conservatives may be towards the principles I have outlined, however convinced they may be that the English 'green' sensibility is not the radical bogeyman of the Left and indeed is an issue which could be a great asset to an alert Conservative Party, however romantically inclined they may find themselves towards the green fields and suet puddings of a romantic New Jerusalem, they still baulk at a final hurdle. Sensitivity to the environment may be all right for intellectuals and dreamers but it harms economic growth, creates anti-entrepreneurial attitudes, and destroys jobs. A less precious view of our surroundings might actually help drag Britain out of her economic torpor. We might look, for a gleaming example, at the refreshingly anti-conservationist stance of the Reagan administration if we ever lack confidence in our daringly radical approach. The President created millions of jobs while blaming pollution on the trees. To be green is to be wet.

There is considerable force to this argument, and many traditionally 'green' attitudes have been blindly opposed to even the slightest discomfiture caused by growth. Yet, if we look at what I have tried to re-define as the real green tradition in England, its roots in a more moderate and conservative sensibility need not necessarily be opposed to sensible and creative growth. Wealth is, after all, essential for a beautiful environment. A declining agricultural industry or an economic depression in a major industrial city can be disastrous for the physical beauty of our surroundings, and those who really care about environmental health will also care about the money that makes it possible. Those who care about old buildings do not want to see them embalmed in some economic tomb but rather as part of a thriving economy. There is a corollary to this as well: jobs come to pleasant surroundings. Companies wishing to attract staff of a high quality will need to provide for agreeable housing possibilities and an attractive site. Many of the areas in Britain with the most successful growth records have managed to combine entrepreneurial dynamism with a close attention to social, cultural, and environmental amenities. The case histories of York, Cambridge, Chester and Edinburgh all bear this out.

These commonplace observations may serve simply to qualify the normal, knee-jerk belief that environmental health and growth do not go together. In fact, any objective look at recent developments in

the economy show an increasing move towards growth which is essentially benign towards the environment. The growth of services, of self-employment, of retailing, of tourism and of the number of small, home-based businesses has been the most spectacular trend of the Thatcher boom, while manufacturing industry, especially heavy industry, has continued to decline. The new industries have centred in agreeable 'green' environments in the South West and South East and have moved out of more urban concentrations. The great urban success stories, on the other hand, such as the regeneration of inner Liverpool, or the resuscitation of Covent Garden, have worked with the grain of existing environmental and architectural tradition rather than scrapping everything and starting again. Those 1960 experiments in simple demolition and rebuilding as the key to centrally directed growth now mark the urban wastelands of many redeveloped inner-cities in the northern industrial belt. Thatcherism on the other hand has seen the spread of a more imaginative and sensitively green approach to urban planning and renewal, with private enterprise as a central feature in the whole scheme. Thatcherite growth has been increasingly green, almost despite itself.

This is putting it too simply, of course. Hideous architecture continues to be built, although a distinct change is under way; Tory local councils have still not thoroughly embraced a more subtle approach to generating new industry, while preserving the character of an area which attracted the industry in the first place; green belts have come under increasing government pressure, despite assurances to the contrary; the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act has shown itself to be a paper-tiger in the issues it has tried to confront; the Cabinet rhetoric (unlike Prince Charles') has failed to capture the public mood or to adapt its policies for job creation with a more imaginative and subtle environmental approach. But the tide may well be turning.

What if, for example, the government developed a popular and simple strategy which could claim both to be environmentally progressive and economically radical? What if it turned the environmental effects of the new growth into a virtue, pursued incentives for renovation, countryside conservation, inner-city renewal and service-based growth so that its economic revolution could both capture public imagination and provide a tangibly new image as the government seeks a new term? What if it could out-bid the Alliance and Labour as the more radically green party, which could yet also deliver more convincingly on the economy?

This might take a bit of imagination. It would certainly take a dynamic presentation, to make the most political capital out of the new direction. But in all this, the Conservatives would be touching one of the most sensitive nerves of the eighties, allying themselves with an unabashedly popular feeling and also regaining a sense of what conservatism may be supposed to be about anyway. The problem is that Conservatives have not stopped talking about growth itself, while rarely enunciating what growth might be *for*. A green and pleasant land, fully exploiting its environmental and cultural assets, as a magnet for service-based, high-technology, entrepreneurial growth is a vision which Tories could very credibly present.

An Agenda for the Third Term

It is not the aim of this essay to provide a meticulous blue-print to be executed by quiet civil servants. Whatever is done should be done with the maximum amount of noise and conviction. Credit should be claimed at every opportunity for the new direction and maximum publicity given to all the environmental advances made. The popular benefits of any new approach can be reaped only if they are put across imaginatively and well. The advantage is that a green image must be one of the most easily sold properties on the contemporary political scene. It would take a public relations disaster not to make it into a popular initiative – but such disasters have, unfortunately, been a feature of the present Government. A new dose of the dynamism of Mrs Thatcher's Opposition period may well be essential to make the entire package work.

Moreover, it is a fact about the institutional and administrative framework for environmental policy that a great deal rests on the attitudes of the few individuals making important decisions. The personal inclinations of the Secretary of State for the Environment matter a great deal in a whole variety of concerns, and simply the outlook of countless local councillors up and down the country holds the key to a real change of direction. A new attitude at all levels, affecting myriads of decisions small and large, is the single most important reform required. Much else could naturally follow.

Central government can, however, act sensibly in a few areas to signal a new mood, as well as do some tangible good for the environment. What I am proposing below is not intended as a detailed or prescriptive course of action: it is merely *an* agenda, not *the* agenda. It concentrates on three themes:

- (i) generating 'green growth'
 - (ii) preserving natural and urban beauty
 - (iii) extending popular involvement and interest in the environment.
- Insofar as I am able, I have attempted to make the package roughly neutral in terms of public expenditure, although varying emphasis within its framework could push the bill up or down. I have also attempted to weave it in with the conservative principles and English traditions already sketched.

Green growth: conservation/enterprise zones

The role conservation can play in generating growth has long been

ignored. Improving the existing housing stock generates jobs in the construction industry, can resuscitate depressed areas and is often more sensitive to genuine business interests than demolition and rebuilding. The Palumbo controversy, for example, brought to light two distinct business interests: the enterprises on the site who favoured retaining the character of the city because it suited their way of conducting and generating business, and the property developers who make money out of upheaval. In many cases, and the proof can be seen in countless redeveloped inner areas, growth may actually have been curtailed by wholesale reconstruction. Inhuman environments can reduce efficiency and deter customers.

There is also a clear economic defence of conservation: thrift. It makes sense to maintain a strongly-built inherited building stock, rather than demolish and rebuild at enormous expense. The money saved can be more effectively invested. Conservation also helps freedom and mobility. A variety of good housing stock in a range of locations increases the individual's freedom to choose where to live, from the village to the inner city. At the moment, poor urban housing may actually hinder the move towards the growth which the present Government wishes to encourage.

Nor need the Government engage in any clumsy or direct intervention. It can merely set the climate for private enterprise to do the job. One simple measure in urban conservation would be to revive the old Schedule A tax concession for maintenance of listed buildings. This simply means that all or part of the expenditure to restore or revive listed buildings can be set against tax. Local listed buildings could be included but at a lower rate of tax relief. Alternatively, owners of locally listed, or listed buildings, might be able to enter into a restricted covenant with the local authority to maintain their building to a certain standard, and in return, be granted some rate relief.

Such measures need not even be in force for ever. They might last for a provisional period, during which time private enterprise can restore a considerable proportion of the housing stock. The advantage of this approach is also that restoration is most likely to occur in areas where it would make economic sense, and be regulated by market forces. Moreover, it takes the idea of conservation away from State-aided restoration of particular projects and brings it back into ordinary people's everyday lives and jobs, from the country house to the inner city. The experience in the United States, with the 1976 Tax Reform Act, which gave similar tax concessions for the repair and conversion

of buildings, especially for small businesses, is enormously encouraging. Such a limited tax concession avoids clumsy government interventions, provides a major temporary boost to employment, lays the foundations for new, cheaper and more humane premises for enterprises, and renovates the national housing stock: a clear example of how growth can be green.

There is, however, a principle at stake here: should the Government do anything at all to direct where growth and building takes place? In recent statements, the Government has rightly distanced itself from much of the post-war macro-economic planning of its predecessors. But that does not mean – indeed cannot mean – that the Government is not intervening already, through county structure plans, green belts and protected rural areas. What is required is a balance between allowing a general economic freedom to move and build and yet mitigating, as much as possible, unnecessary environmental damage. Earmarking whole areas of Berkshire and Essex for mass development, while buildings remain poorly used, homes half occupied and sites derelict within existing town and city boundaries, is simply against commonsense. Of course developers prefer clean, green-field sites, and will effectively lobby for them – but that does not mean that government cannot legitimately coax them into more difficult urban projects, by micro-planning decisions which leave them no option. Economic mobility has to work within some constraints in this tiny, over-populated island, and the challenge of this Government and local government is to extract the maximum economic growth and the minimum environmental damage from the facts of that English situation.

Urban restoration through individual tax incentives may well release housing and business space without new encroachment on our countryside; scrapping most planning controls in some derelict inner-city areas, or urban infill sites – not in the green belt – may also ease pressure for green-field development. Reaffirming the green belt may also help to concentrate minds on regenerating the health of our major cities, and should be a central part not only of the Government's environmental but also political strategy. There is a major Alliance threat in many of the areas under planning review.

Planning reform

The extraordinary complexity and contradictions of planning restrictions call for nothing less than a complete review of what the

present regulations encourage or do not encourage. What is in danger of happening is that pressure for new building for housing and industry will dictate decisions without a coherent view of the entire picture being taken. Piecemeal relaxation of the green belt in the South East is both politically damaging and possibly unnecessary if the alternatives are sufficiently considered. There is little doubt, for example, that the recession has left enormous areas of the inner cities and elsewhere, either literally derelict or in a process of precipitous decline. Over 110,000 acres have been registered as such – surely it is these areas, rather than sensitive new green belt land which could most benefit from a very great relaxation of planning controls. As part of this strategy, two further pressure valves, in line with radical government thinking, could be released: abolishing the need for planning permission for individuals wishing to convert their homes into small businesses, and a reform of rent legislation which militates against the private rented market. The effect of these measures should be a marked encouragement of private enterprise and mobility – but in a way which can preserve our surroundings more or less intact.

But, as the strongest moral counter-argument runs, for whom? Is not green belt protection an essentially selfish proposal? Is it not merely a desire to hog natural beauty for the few lucky enough to live there and prevent others from enjoying it?

There is, in reply, a simple argument. The value of this beauty consists in its being undeveloped. To develop it so that others may enjoy it is a logical absurdity: the resource diminishes: the more people rush in, the greater the destruction of the resource. Moreover, the urban environment, as has been shown, can be a principal beneficiary of green belt protection. Beauty need no longer be a prerogative of the countryside in a policy which is both economically radical, yet environmentally sensitive.

Tourism

This is an area in which conservation and wealth-creation go hand in hand. Tourism is one of this country's major growth industries, in which we have successfully outstripped many of our competitors. It brings in foreign finance and is remarkably labour-intensive.

But any coherent government strategy to encourage tourism must have an environmental foundation. Tourists do not merely come to consume food or ice creams – they come to see our natural and historic heritage. Methods to ease customs and immigration blockages

miss the point entirely. Improving the appearance of our architectural and rural inheritance is a far more direct way of generating tourist growth, as the figures for visits to historic buildings show. In addition, the scope for internal domestic tourist growth to reduce our tourist deficit is greatest in that asset which cannot be obtained overseas: our heritage.

This country's marketable product is its beauty, history and culture, all of which are greatly threatened by a simplistic attempt at environmentally destructive growth. We have to break down the prejudices that somehow see this sort of product as inferior or less honourable than exporting cars. We have a better post-war record for tourism than for cars. Why not develop our strengths, rather than be obsessed by our weaknesses? To put it in clear, Thatcherite terms, the balance sheet will benefit, along, incidentally, with the unemployment figures, by conservation-oriented growth in tourism.

How should we develop this? There are no end of suggestions made by a variety of bodies. Perhaps, above all, the North East and industrial heartland of the northern conurbations should be much more imaginatively developed with conservation projects in association with the English Tourist Board, British Rail, local authorities and central government incentives to attract the major tourist flood away from the London/Stratford/Bath triangle into the architectural, industrial and natural inheritance of the North; the possibilities of more tourism in the wider countryside should be examined, with more advice given by the Ministry of Agriculture to encourage farmers to diversify their commercial concerns from mere crop production towards tourist accommodation and access; the conversion of redundant barns into camping facilities in the countryside, less planning control of conversion of private homes into guest houses, and the possible use of more university accommodation for tourist summer demand in university cities, are all sensible areas worthy of investigation; tax relief on the costs of conversion and opening of historic buildings in areas where these might significantly enhance the tourist potential of a region is also an option.

There is one general measure which, by reversing an anomalous institutional bias against conservation, could significantly rescue whole areas from unsightly rebuilding, and thus give good structural support for a more creative tourist policy. VAT is now levied on repairs to buildings but not on new buildings. This is an indefensible anomaly; a tax on conservation. At the present moment, tax on repairs can be

avoided as long as a majority of the building work is new. Restorers, to avoid tax, actually have to destroy parts of buildings in order to restore them without VAT – and the bureaucracy required to gauge the proportion of new work to restoration is both idiosyncratic and costly. The Government should either remove VAT completely from repairs or add it to new building; or it might consider, to balance revenue, a simple tax on demolition. The present situation is both illogical and damaging to a sensitive approach to the economic potential of an increasing tourist trade, in which old buildings and architectural beauty score as a primary reason for Britain's outstanding commercial success.

Preserving Beauty

The idea of a sweeping new review of our whole use of the rural estate was first floated by the House of Commons' Environment Committee's First Report in January of this year. The reasoning behind this may not simply have been that it saved the committee from facing some of the fundamental policy choices it identified in countryside management. It came from the recognition that present Government policy is plain contradictory: on the one hand, the Ministry of Agriculture through the Common Agricultural Policy, and even the Forestry Commission, tend to see the countryside as a means of producing (or over-producing) particular goods which can be marketed (or subsidised) for a given return. On the other hand, the Department of the Environment sees its role as protecting the natural environment from rapid or damaging change, through legislative incentives. Where stands the Government?

The answer is predictable: in the middle. But the revealing thing about the evidence provided for the committee is that, standing in the middle at the moment represents unparalleled destruction of the natural environment. The economic structure makes a mockery of legislative attempts to counter-balance it. Massively subsidising production can lead only to one thing: a countryside increasingly geared to production alone, and the winking out of those very elements which give it environmental health and diversity. The measures of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, even amended, are feeble in reply. They can only persuade, by offering farmers 'management agreements', which compensate both for the return foregone by not developing environmentally significant land, *and* for the subsidies foregone at the same time. The cost can be significant, the farmer is encouraged merely to threaten any area in order to be offered substantial compensation for not doing something he need never in reality have seriously conceived of doing in the first place, and in the last resort the farmer can develop anyway. And these measures apply only to a tiny proportion of the entire rural estate: the rest is left to the ravages of the CAP.

But refusing to acquiesce in this process demands major reform, either to change the very structure of the Common Agricultural Policy, or to mitigate its effects in a way which is both comprehensive and enforceable. This inevitably means government intervention in the wider countryside – but only as a necessary counter-weight to already

massive government intervention in the form of subsidy.

Two principles need to be kept in mind: the preservation of a beautiful countryside needs the consent of those who live and work in it and any workable political strategy has to be able to produce positive and tangible results, over a wider area than tiny protected 'oases'.

Firstly, the whole concept of the management agreement needs to be reviewed. It is essentially a reacting mechanism, which stops damage, rather than one which encourages active conservation. The principle of compensating twice over for crops and subsidy, and the danger of actually encouraging threats to the environment by tempting remuneration, is patently absurd. In the areas in which such agreements apply, a far more sensible initiative would be flat grants offered to farmers positively to engage in conservation projects. These grants would not be based on any 'compensation' principle – and could be cheaper than 'management agreements' as a result. Moreover, the money spent performs a tangible good, rather than avoiding a newsworthy bad – and puts the government in a positive environmental light, as well as involving farmers in conservation on their own land.

Secondly, the wider countryside needs some protection. Again, farmers' and landowners' co-operation is essential. It is impossible to *force* owners to keep up a hedge or tend a copse, or maintain fenland, merely by a flourish of the bureaucratic pen. Conservation, in practice, is not merely avoiding damage; it is an active, time-consuming craft: impossible without the attention and care of countless landowners. At the moment, government positively encourages owners to destroy the countryside, and government is to blame for the consequences – not the farmers who are merely attempting to make a living within the system.

One direct, simple, and enforceable way of counteracting this bias works on the same principle as Schedule A for buildings. It redirects some government finance for subsidy into providing a form of tax relief in lieu of commitments by farmers to certain conservation projects. Money spent on conservation can be written off against tax so that farmers are given a direct fiscal incentive to maintain or develop projects beneficial to the appearance of the wider countryside. Property-owning is here linked closely with environmental concern for one's own, and government finance ceases to see land merely as ground for commercial exploitation. It involves no central, bureaucratic imposition of 'environmental health' or detailed

regulation. It involves the active consent of country dwellers in the maintenance of the countryside, and would represent the most effective measure for countryside conservation now on anyone's political agenda. But what of controls? As a means of regulating every detail of the rural scene, they are surely impractical. The manpower required to force owners to tend hedgerows or clip trees would be enormous and absurd. Even the environmentalist Big Brother of Labour's 'green' policy would be over-stretched and incompetent.

But there is an argument for coercion to avoid major environmental damage, if co-operation or fiscal incentives fail. A conservation strategy which will hold together needs some sticks as well as carrots. The Environment Committee's January review of the Wildlife and Countryside Act came to this conclusion and urged the extension of compulsory notification in advance whereby landowners in all protected areas (not only those in National Parks) had to notify major changes to the relevant authority.

The principle of giving warning signals for any significant environmental danger might even be phased in over a period for the wider countryside as well, so that local authorities could work with the Countryside Commission and the Nature Conservancy Council in approving or suggesting refinements to major structural change. In the last resort – and this should be rare – some sort of landscape conservation order should be available to provide a legal means to stop large-scale environmental damage in *any* part of the countryside.

Such laws are not those of a government opposed to individual liberty. They are merely a framework for preventing irresponsibility, and are a necessary back-up for any other more positive conservation measures. Responsible farmers need have nothing to fear from them, and most hardly any contact with them. They should be regarded as an encouragement, not as a constraint, and would do much to increase environmental awareness among farmers and ease national insecurity about countryside protection. The unthinking antipathy of many landowners to any legal controls is both irrational and profoundly unconservative. As Hobbes put it, 'The use of Lawes . . . is not to bind the People from all Voluntary actions; but to direct and keep them in such a motion . . . as Hedges are set, not to stop Travellers, but to keep them in the way.'

Perhaps some hard figures might make the point more succinctly. Since 1949, 95% of lowland neutral grasslands have lost significant wildlife interest; of chalk grassland 80% has been lost or

suffered serious damage; 40% of lowland heath has disappeared; 45% of limestone pavements in Northern England have gone, from 30-50% of semi-natural woodlands have been destroyed, 50% of lowland fens and 30% of upland grasslands have disappeared and even before the introduction of the CAP, it was estimated that a quarter of Britain's hedgerows have been uprooted since the war. The fact that we now massively encourage over-production of unwanted food has only accelerated the process, and the legislation which has developed in the three major stages of 1949, 1968 and 1981 has not even begun to take into account this enormous structural assault on our natural inheritance. In an historical perspective, the 1981 Act would have been a great environmental step forward, had the economic structure of the countryside been the same as it was in 1945.

What, though, can be done? The Government can either tinker or reform. Tinkering would mean: change attitudes within the Ministry of Agriculture so that conservationist thinking could more effectively influence the grant-giving structure, do the same within the Forestry Commission, extend advance notification of change in land-use from National Parks to all protected areas, increase compensation payments and encourage positive conservation projects. This may in itself be difficult, but could ease some of the pressure, at considerable expense, on the specially protected sites to which the measures apply.

The drawback to this is obvious. As long as the fundamental structure of the CAP is intact, it is all whistling in the wind, as far as extending real protection to the wider countryside; it could be enormously expensive; politically, the Government can't win – it is a defensive retreat, where spectacular coverage can be given to the failures (Halvergate Marshes) and where success means simply standing still. In practice, it means acquiescing in the continued attack on the countryside.

Pollution

Here we return to more predictable territory, and it is not the aim of this pamphlet to enter into detailed analyses of this complex area which are best dealt with elsewhere. But it is within the scope of this essay to suggest that Tories need not be so nervous and defensive on the issue. In fact, the Conservative record is considerably more impressive than its public image would suggest. At the moment, several complex issues are uppermost: acid rain, the implementation of the measures outlined in Part II of the Control of Pollution Act 1974 by July 1986, the questions arising from the particular issue of nuclear power and other minor concerns such as river-cleaning, stubble-burning and noise-pollution. The Government's position on many environmentally sensitive questions is greatly hampered by poor presentation of its case and by obsessive secrecy. The arguments for a relaxation of government secrecy in this area as outlined by the Royal Commission's Report of October 1983 make particularly convincing reading, as do their recommendations on the phasing-out by legislative sanctions of straw-burning.

The Tory image is, alas, one of reluctant acceptance of conservationist arguments, rather than of bringing a conservationist rationale into the centre of government policy. The economic arguments in favour of central intervention, for example, are rarely put: there is no straightforward conflict between environmental controls on pollution and economic growth. Restrictions and incentives to prevent pollution may well spawn new processes and new technologies: the Japanese experience of the 1960s and 1970s shows just that – controls and new growth can go together in a virtuous circle. The American experience may also point to the effectiveness of a more subtle variety of treatments for environmental health. It could be perfectly possible to combine the British principle of 'polluter-pays' with a system which relied also upon the incentives of licences and taxation, in a way which would give the market greater choice in determining its environmental priorities than would simple coercive controls. Such measures are, however, increasingly meaningless in a purely national context, and any convincing and imaginative strategy for a 'green' future can be planned only in close co-operation with our European partners. Our reluctance to try to co-ordinate international action on acid rain shows a lamentable failure of imagination, as well, possibly of judgement. Even if the particular causes of acid rain cannot

be securely identified, a different calculation of risks or an increase in the priority given in such calculations to the health of our natural environment, could have led to a more positive response. 'A more positive response' might sum up the change of attitude that this pamphlet recommends. There is not as much to be afraid of as we might think.

There might even be something to gain. The battle over the GLC revealed that there are policies pursued by Mr Ken Livingstone that were actually popular. His belief that a pleasant urban environment was more important than a purist balance-sheet approach to public transport is to many no more than simple commonsense. Tory local authorities might well learn from those popular decisions in favour of investing in a pleasurable and subsidised transport system, by analysing more seriously proposals for traffic regulation, discouragement of heavy traffic in city or town centres, voucher schemes for private cars, or even an increase in pedestrian zones and cycle lanes. Again much experience has shown that traditional economic arguments against such improvements to the environment contradict themselves on their own terms: retailing and business benefit from a pleasant shopping environment and from a credible public transport network. Central government might even reassess its rigorous policy of encouraging road against rail, by realising that our towns and cities are being placed under the sort of strain for which they were never designed, that an expansionist motorway system, as well as wrecking areas of natural beauty, may even in the long run *encourage* the traffic it is designed to alleviate, and that a viable and modernised rail network could prove to be the most cost-effective means of transporting goods and people. A stronger Tory commitment to public transport may, in the present context, be heresy, but it is in line with many popular sentiments, in touch with the particular demands of the English environment, and even economically worthwhile. Such reasons make even heresy attractive.

Popular Involvement

This area represents the most notable success in English policy towards the environment since the war. Alongside the governmental structures emanating from the Dower Report of 1947, the private sector offers the most impressive examples of energetic and sustained initiatives. This is often overlooked in policy studies which centre almost exclusively on government and fail to realise that the most effective action on a wide range of issues can best be tackled by independent and local groups. The RSPB, for example, relying solely on voluntary contributions, has quadrupled its membership in the last 15 years to nearly half a million members and is actually outpacing the Nature Conservancy Council on acquiring nature reserve sites, of which it now owns some 95, with an area of over 116,000 acres. The Royal Society for Nature Conservation co-ordinates independent nature trusts up and down the country which total some 109,000 acres; other organisations such as the British Trust for Ornithology, the Wildfowl Trust, the British Ecological Society and the Woodland Trust (set up in 1972, with 111 woodland sites and 33,000 members) all give invaluable advice and guidance to the official Nature Conservancy Council, as well as conducting their own research and projects. This tiny selection of the list fails to mention the largest bodies such as the National Trust, or the World Wildlife Fund (UK), which alone spends £1.5 million a year. Then there are the thousands of ramblers associations, angling groups, nature conservation bodies, canal preservers, local railway enthusiasts and insect lovers who combine to make English public and private life the diverse and eccentric phenomenon that it is. There is no shortage of evidence that government is a poor substitute for these groups and that a sensible policy for the environment would be one that would encourage them to care for our surroundings while government, by its agriculture or transport or taxation policies, sets the climate in which their work can reach fruition.

The policies that can achieve this are remarkably in line with much current thinking. High on the list must be the dispersal and extension of property-ownership, the lowering of private taxation, and the maintenance of tax relief for bodies, such as many of the above, which deserve general public support. Greater independence for official bodies such as the Nature Conservancy Council and the Countryside Commission fit in this general framework. Within the NCC, however, a reassessment of how well its erstwhile research

facility is now working with its administrative branch would be worthwhile: one of the disappointments of the original concept of a coherent nature conservation policy as outlined in 1947, is that the research results have not been fed into industry or into technology as directly or as effectively as they should have been. The advantage of a single body combining research and administration is that the channels for such 'cross-fertilisation' are more open.

Within this generally freer and more independent structure, there are also proposals which the Government might consider further. The Countryside Commission's projects for the uplands, the urban fringe and the lowlands might benefit from some liaison with the various schemes in operation for youth employment: why not alternate spells on the YTS with Countryside Commission projects for surrounding countryside or even for architecture? The administration should take place as much as possible within the existing frameworks of the organisations concerned and as much as possible within existing budgets. Planning procedures for particularly sensitive environmental projects might also be reviewed so that there might be more scope for the opinions of surrounding residents to have formal expression. So often, in safe local councils, the interests of those directly concerned can be lost in more general considerations and in procedural wrangles: a clear stipulation that developers need to hold a referendum of local residents to prove a lack of serious hostility to the plan might be considered in special cases.

In all these measures, the direction is clear: give people a stake in their own environment and they will protect it. Give them the economic and social climate in which they can express and develop their enthusiasm and ideas for their surroundings, and the green and pleasant land need no longer be a comforting Victorian myth. It can be a reality particularly suited to the post-industrial era.

The New Opportunity

There is perhaps one final way of appealing to the instincts of political Conservatives. Charting a 'green' course both within the Department of the Environment and throughout all government policy-making bodies would be worth votes. Both the Alliance and Labour Parties realise this and are formulating strategies to reshape the DOE and seize the green initiative. In vulnerable, marginal, Alliance-threatened suburbia, the image of a property-developing, polluting government is likely to prove disastrous in an election. Green-belt destruction, countryside exploitation and an attitude reminiscent of General Motors to any sensitive environmental issue are huge electoral liabilities. The green issue will not go away. The correct and healthy Tory reaction is to expropriate it.

Moreover, it can help other aspects of government policy. Pointing out and making a virtue of a green dimension to the new economic growth could break down for the first time English cultural antipathy to making money. Developing green instincts among property owners would be a valuable extension of the Conservative post-war success in this field. A clearer vision of a future green and wealthy land might do much to bring some clarity and direction to the drift of current government policies, along lines which could unite all wings of the party.

But such cynicism should be unnecessary. The environment is essentially a conservative issue, springing from conservative sentiments. It is not a liberal or intellectual abstraction but a detailed and humane reality, extending from the inner city to the National Park, from the country house to the council terrace. As Conservatives, it is our natural territory. To ignore it, to misunderstand it or to mishandle it would be the great betrayal.

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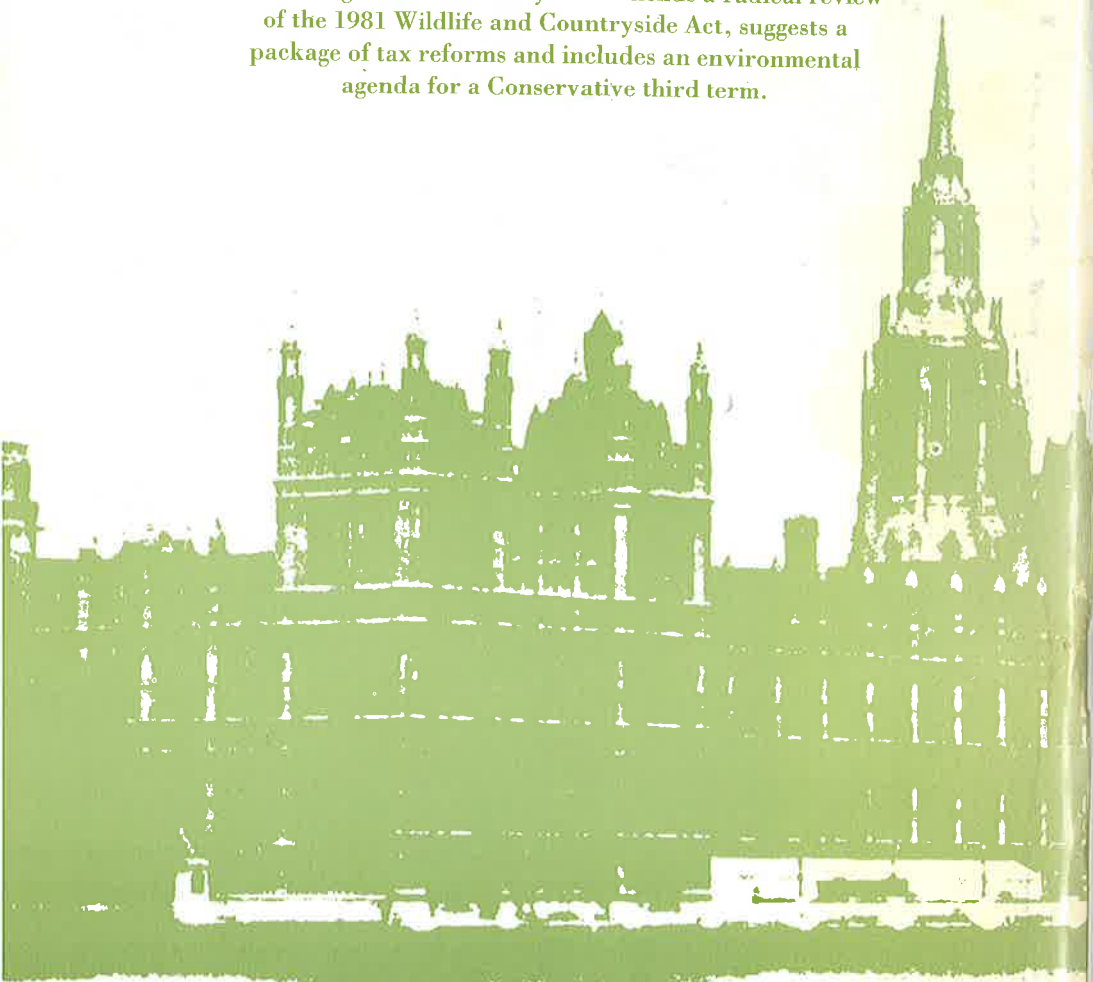
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