The Politics of the Environment
Ideas, Activism, Policy

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Before the late 1960s, the environment had a relatively insignificant place on the political agenda; today, it is one of the most challenging, contested and important subjects in politics. This rise to prominence reflects a widespread public concern about the state of the environment; indeed, the idea that the planet is confronting an eco-crisis that may threaten the very existence of life as we know it has wide currency. The lifestyle choices of many people are increasingly shaped by environmental considerations: they eat organic produce, they cycle to work and they invest their savings ‘ethically’. As citizens, by joining environmental groups or voting for green parties, they put pressure on governments to protect the environment. The mainstream environmental movement is an important actor in national and international politics, while the dramatic stunts of eco-warriors have become a familiar part of the political repertoire. Green parties, particularly in Europe, are now an established feature of party politics and have even joined coalition governments in several of the most powerful countries in the world. Established parties have also adopted greener policies because every government, irrespective of political hue, is obliged to address a wide range of environmental problems. Most countries are, at least formally, committed to the principles of sustainable development, and the search for international co-operation to resolve global environmental problems such as climate change has become a central concern of international diplomacy. In short, the environment is now firmly on the political agenda in most industrialised countries.

Nevertheless, environmentalists frequently despair over how little actually seems to have changed. The overall state of the environment in most countries continues to deteriorate, despite some successes such as the reduction of some forms of air pollution. Not least, evidence suggests that climate change, probably the most serious contemporary global environmental problem, is gathering pace (IPCC 2001), while other global problems, such as biodiversity loss, rainforest depletion and desertification rapidly deteriorate. The litany of eco-disasters – ranging from natural disasters such as floods and droughts, through oil-tanker spillages and nuclear accidents, to the indirect effects of NATO bombing in Serbia – rolls inexorably on. Meanwhile, global capitalism and consumerist...
lifestyles grow ever more demanding on the environment. People want more goods, they maintain a love affair with their cars and they are wedded to a ‘throwaway’ culture that results in landfill sites piled high with plastic bottles and obsolete computers. Compared to entrenched business interests and technocratic elites, the environmental movement wields only a marginal influence over key policy decisions. Despite the growing party politicisation of environmental issues, electoral politics is still dominated by economic and materialist issues. Governments frequently talk ‘green’ but, in practice, usually give priority to economic growth over environmental protection. It seems that the sustainable society is still a distant dream.

It is a fascinating – and frustrating – feature of environmental politics that both the above perspectives contain a good deal of truth. There is no doubt that environmental issues have had a big impact on contemporary politics, and yet the frequency with which governments adopt a business-as-usual response to environmental problems raises the cynical thought that perhaps nothing much has really changed. This puzzle is one of many challenges confronting environmental politics, which has rapidly become an established subject of political enquiry and a regular part of the university curriculum.

The rationale behind this book is that environmental politics is a distinctive subject that is worthy of study both in its own right and also for the challenges it poses for the wider discipline of politics. Environmental politics is a wide-ranging subject with three core components:

1. the study of political theories and ideas relating to the environment;
2. the examination of political parties and environmental movements;
3. the analysis of public policy-making and implementation affecting the environment at international, national and local levels.

The broad aim of this book is to provide an introduction to environmental politics that covers all three aspects of this rapidly expanding subject. The primary focus of the book is on environmental politics in the industrialised world. It is the affluent industrialised countries of Europe and North America that are largely responsible for causing contemporary environmental problems and it is essential that they take the lead in solving them. Much of the substance of environmental politics – ideas and theories, parties and movements, policy initiatives – is rooted in the industrialised world too. Although North–South issues and development themes regularly surface in the book, for reasons of substance, practicality and space, the book has a primary focus on advanced industrialised countries. The rest of this introduction identifies the distinctive features of environmental politics and explains the structure of the book.

So, in what ways is environmental politics distinctive? One distinguishing characteristic is that it has a primary concern with the relationship between human society and the natural world. This human–nature relationship connects the extraordinarily diverse set of issues encompassed by
environmental politics, which include wilderness preservation and nature conservation, numerous forms of air, water and land pollution, the deple-
tion of scarce resources such as fish stocks, rainforests and endangered
species, the use of nuclear power and biotechnology, and ‘global’ issues
such as biodiversity loss, climate change and ozone depletion. Traditionally, many of these issues were (and often still are) treated dis-
cretely as separate policy problems. The increasing tendency to conceptu-
alise these problems as ‘environmental’ reflects the emergence of an envi-
ronmental discourse, or way of thinking about the world, which has given
coherence and political significance to the notion of ‘the environment’. 
Underpinning this discourse is a holistic perspective which, rather than
examining individual issues in isolation, focuses on the interdependence
of environmental, political, social and economic issues and the way in
which they interact with each other.

At this point it is important to provide some historical context because
the emergence of this wider environmental discourse is a relatively recent
development. Of course, many of the problems that we now regard as envi-
ronmental, such as pollution, deforestation and land degradation, are not
new. In the classical world, Plato, Lucretius and Caesar all commented on
the problem of soil erosion (Wall 1994: 2–3). The collapse of the Mayan
civilisation hundreds of years ago can probably be attributed to deforesta-
tion and soil erosion (Ponting 1992). Much later, however, it was the indus-
trial and scientific revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
that really created the conditions for contemporary concern about the
environment. In particular, the process of industrialisation contributed to
environmental degradation by accelerating resource consumption, urban
development and pollution. One of the earliest examples of what we
would now call environmental legislation was the 1863 Alkali Act in
Britain, whilst in the USA the first legal action against air pollution
occurred in 1876 in St Louis (Paehlke 1989: 23). The first wave of concern
about environmental issues can be traced to the emergence of conserva-
tion and nature protection groups in the latter part of the nineteenth and
the early twentieth centuries, reflecting a growing middle-class interest in
the protection of wildlife, wilderness and natural resources (Lowe and
Goyder 1983). Several leading pressure groups, including the Sierra Club
in the USA, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK, and the
Naturschutzbund Deutschland in Germany, date from this period. The conser-
vationist movement established a firm base through the twentieth
century as most countries saw a gradual accumulation of policies affect-
ing various ‘environmental’ issues, ranging from the regulation of indus-
trial pollution to the creation of national parks. Nevertheless, it was not
until the emergence of modern environmentalism – the wave of popular
concern about environmental issues that swept across the developed
world during the 1960s – that the environmental discourse became wide-
spread (Pepper 1996) (see Box 1.1).
The rise of modern environmentalism highlights a second distinctive feature of the environment as a political subject which is that, unlike most other single issues, it comes replete with its own ideology and political movement (Jacobs 1997: 1). An awareness of historical context is again important, for neither a green ideology nor an environmental movement existed before the late 1960s. Modern environmentalism differed from the earlier preservationist and conservationist movements in two important ways (McCormick 1989: ch. 3). First, it was driven by the idea of a global ecological crisis that threatened the very existence of humanity. The atomic age had brought home the fragility of planet Earth. This perception was nurtured by a series of well-publicised eco-disasters, notably the massive oil spillages from the wrecked Torrey Canyon tanker off the Cornish coast in 1967, the blow-out of an oil platform at Santa Barbara, California, two years later, and the mercury poisoning of Minamata Bay in Japan. Following Rachel Carson’s 1962 best-seller, Silent Spring, which alerted the world to the danger posed by the synthetic chemicals used in pesticides such as DDT, advances in scientific knowledge were increasingly catapulted from closed academic circles into the public arena. Fierce public debates about the consequences of population growth, technology and resource depletion encouraged people to think increasingly in global terms about the environment (Ehrlich 1968; Commoner 1971; Meadows et al. 1972). Secondly, modern environmentalism was a political and activist mass movement which demanded a radical transformation in the values and structures of society. It was influenced by the broader ‘politics of affluence’ and the general upsurge in social movement protest at that time. Modern environmentalism came of age on 22 April 1970 when millions of Americans celebrated and protested on Earth Day, which remains the largest environmental demonstration in history. The burgeoning environmental movement certainly helped to popularise the environmental discourse. Governments set up environmental ministries and agencies and introduced swaths of new legislation to protect the environment. The watershed 1972 UN Stockholm conference, which examined how a range of global environmental problems affected human life, marked the entry of the environment onto the international agenda. Thus, by the early
1970s, the component parts of environmental politics had started to take
shape: the appearance of new political ideas and ways of thinking about
the environment; the rise of a mass environmental movement; and the cre-
ation of a new policy agenda.

These three core components of environmental politics provide the
framework for this book, which is divided into three parts to reflect the
distinctive contribution made by each area of study: ideas; parties and
movements; and policy.

Part I explores different ways of thinking about the environment. A
major theme of the book is to explore whether there is now a sufficiently
comprehensive and distinctive view of environmental issues to talk in
terms of a green political ideology, or ‘ecologism’ (Dobson 2000). In partic-
ular, green political thought offers two important insights. One is the
belief that we need to reconceptualise the relationship between humans
and nature, which prompts many important questions about which parts
of nature, if any, have value, on what basis that value may be attributed
and whether such value is equal to that of humans. A further critical
insight is the conviction that the Earth’s resources are finite and that
there are ecological limits to growth which, unless we change our ways,
will sooner rather than later be exceeded. Radical greens draw the conclu-
sion that we need a fundamental reassessment of our value systems and a
restructuring of existing political, social and economic systems in order to
achieve an ecologically sustainable society. Part I assesses this claim that
ecologism is a distinctive ideology. Chapter 2 provides an introduction to
environmental philosophy by exploring ethical questions about how
humans ought to think about and act towards nature. Chapter 3 outlines
and analyses the green political programme and assesses the relationship
between green ideas and other political ideologies.

Part II turns to the question of how we get to a sustainable society, with
a focus on collective action. Environmental activism is now a very broad
church. Green parties have become established in several countries and
there are many ‘environmentalists’ operating with established political
parties. Beyond parties, the contemporary environmental movement now
encompasses mass membership pressure groups such as the Sierra Club,
international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace
and Friends of the Earth, thousands of local grassroots groups and radical
protest groups such as Earth First! Whether by directly influencing the
policy process or indirectly raising public consciousness about environ-
mental issues through media campaigns and protest activities, the envi-
ronmental movement has become a significant political actor and agent
of change. In Chapter 4 the rise of green parties is examined in the context
of the claim that they represent a ‘new politics’. A range of structural and
institutional factors is explored to explain why green parties have
achieved electoral success in some countries, but failed elsewhere, with a
particular focus on Germany, France and Britain. Chapter 5 investigates
the impact of environmental issues on party politics. It looks first at the way green parties, notably the German Greens, have dealt with the transition from pressure politics to parliamentary respectability and now into government; it then assesses the impact of environmentalism on established parties, through case studies of Germany, Britain and the USA. Chapter 6 explores the development and achievements of environmental groups, particularly in the USA and Britain, using the dynamic tension between the large, mainstream environmental lobby and grassroots action as a means of exploring some central questions of green agency, or how to achieve political change.

Finally, Part III is concerned with environmental policy; specifically, it examines progress towards the implementation of sustainable development. Whilst governments may be deaf to the radical message of ecologism, many have been influenced by the alternative policy paradigms of sustainable development and ecological modernisation which offer the promise of protecting the environment by reforming capitalism. As a result, radical ideas like the ‘precautionary principle’, and innovative policy instruments such as eco-taxes, have begun to appear on the policy agenda. At an international level, the search for solutions to global environmental problems has engendered unprecedented efforts to secure widespread international co-operation between independent sovereign states to solve problems such as ozone depletion. However, policymakers have discovered that environmental issues pose distinctive and pressing problems. Chapter 7 explores the environment as a policy problem, identifying its distinguishing characteristics and outlining the traditional policy paradigm, which has proved unable to cope with the range and intensity of contemporary environmental problems. The resilience of this traditional paradigm is explained by the structural power that capitalism gives to producer interests and by the segmentation of the policy process, but the chapter also explores a range of policy models and frameworks that can help make sense of environmental policy-making and show how change is possible. Chapter 8 analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the alternative policy paradigms of sustainable development and ecological modernisation, and the remaining chapters evaluate how far they have been implemented. Chapter 9 looks at the emergence of international co-operation between nation states intended to address problems of the global commons, with detailed studies of climate change and ozone depletion. Chapter 10 investigates progress towards greener government by examining how far environmental policy considerations have been integrated into routine policy-making processes. Chapter 11 analyses the strengths and weaknesses of different policy instruments, concentrating on the key debate between the competing claims of regulatory and market-based instruments, with particular studies of climate change policies in the energy and transport sectors.
Throughout Parts II and III an informal comparative approach is employed. It is informal in the sense that it makes no attempt to follow a rigorous comparative methodology; but it is comparative in that it uses examples and case studies from several different countries, mostly from Europe, the USA and Australasia, to illustrate the arguments.

Another key theme of the book is that environmental politics, in addition to being a distinctive and fascinating subject worthy of study in its own terms, is also interesting and important because it challenges established political discourses, political behaviour and policy agendas. Thus the growing significance of environmental politics has seen political philosophers extend mainstream theories of justice to consider whether non-human nature or future generations of humans have interests or rights or are owed obligations. Political ideologies, including conservatism, liberalism, socialism, anarchism and feminism, have had to respond to the environmental challenge, giving rise to several new hybrid concepts, such as ecosocialism and ecofeminism. Where green parties have achieved electoral success, they have destabilised long-standing party alliances and voting patterns. The growing legitimacy and influence of environmental groups has frequently disrupted established policy networks and challenged the influence of producer interests over the policy process. The sustainable development paradigm forces governments to rethink the way they make policy. Traditional Realist accounts of international relations struggle to account for the growth of co-operation and collective action to prevent environmental degradation. The book will show how the rise of environmental politics has therefore been responsible for a widespread re-examination of established assumptions, interpretations and beliefs about contemporary political ideas and behaviour.

Conversely, core political ideas inform our understanding of environmental politics. Concepts such as justice, democracy and equity are central to green political theory. For example, an analysis of the green commitment to participatory democracy can draw on a rich literature on democratic theory and practice. The political science literature on new politics and postmaterialism offers important insights about the development of the environmental movement. The study of environmental policymaking is incomplete without concepts and frameworks drawn from the public policy literature, such as agenda-setting theory or policy network analysis.

Some familiar political dichotomies also resurface. Is the state or the market the more effective means of achieving environmental policy outcomes? Are centralised or decentralised political structures better at dealing with environmental problems? Most importantly, in debating how to achieve a sustainable society, greens confront the familiar dilemma of reformism versus radicalism. Should environmental activists pursue an evolutionary reform of the capitalist system by getting elected to parliament, or should they seek nothing less than a radical transformation
of the system? Should groups adopt conventional or unconventional forms of protest? Is collective action (through green parties and pressure groups) or individual action (by changing lifestyles and green consumerism) more effective? In returning to some of these themes in the concluding chapter, I argue that, as the environment has become an increasingly mainstream issue, so the centre of gravity in environmental politics has shifted from a radical rejection of contemporary society and a relatively narrow concern with ecological issues, to a reformist acceptance of capitalist liberal democracy accompanied by a broader social justice agenda.

Further reading and websites


Note