

GREEN CONSERVATISM

MIKE HANNIS investigates whether Tories can really be environmentalists, and finds Roger Scruton still fighting a rearguard action against the French Revolution.

The current Government, dominated by the Conservative party, began this parliament with a bold promise that it would be “the greenest government ever”. Few would now agree, and *The Land* has not been alone in pointing out the increasingly apparent hollowness of this claim.

Back in the heady opposition days of 2007, David Cameron commissioned a thoughtful 549-page *Blueprint for a Green Economy* from prominent green Conservatives Zac Goldsmith, now a Tory MP, and John Gummer, environment minister under John Major and now chair of the Committee on Climate Change. This report was stuffed with statements like “the move to a low-carbon economy must be the overriding aim of any responsible government”.¹ It opened with an inspirational quote from a founding father of modern English Conservatism (who confusingly was actually a Whig):

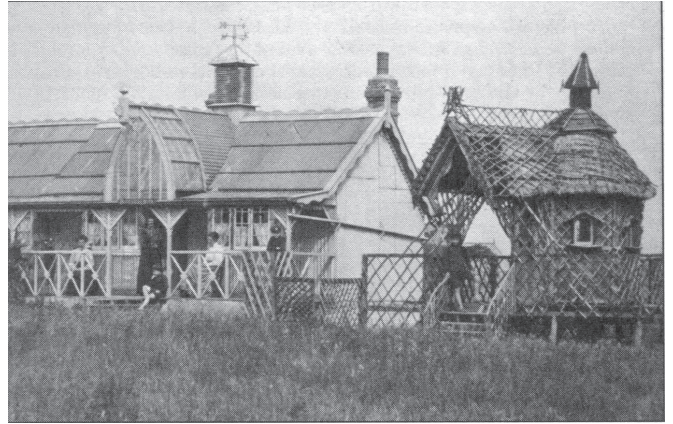
“The great Error of our Nature is not to know where to stop; not to be satisfied with any reasonable Acquirement; not to compound with our Condition; but to lose all we have gained by an insatiable Pursuit after more.” (Edmund Burke, 1757)

Yet now, in 2013, the Chancellor sees himself as defending the “insatiable Pursuit” of economic growth against the threat of environmentalism. Investment in renewables is undermined by ministerial derision, while new incentives are introduced for shale gas and nuclear power. Grants for free home insulation have become loans, while developers are allowed to build to lower standards and to ‘offset’ the impact of concreting green-field sites.

Still, while it may not be very visible in this Government, figures like Goldsmith and Gummer prove that Conservative environmentalism does certainly exist. In fact, within modern ‘Western’ politics the link between environmentalism and left-wing political ideas is arguably a relatively recent one. Environmental concern has plenty of historic connections with conservatism, centred around ideas of tradition, rootedness, and of course conservation.

The late 19th and early 20th century beginnings of organised English environmentalism were focussed on conserving the rural landscapes and historic estates so beloved of the elites who had historically owned and enjoyed them. The aim was to protect these valued environments against perceived threats from industrialisation and a growing population.

Tellingly, the ‘problem’ part of this growing population was usually the lower classes. Even Wordsworth’s campaign against railways in the Lake District was essentially an attempt to prevent the timeless beauty and tranquillity of the area being shattered by the arrival of the great unwashed, who would in any case not be able to properly appreciate it. Much the same motivation lay behind the formation of the CPRE in the early twentieth century and even, so the late lamented anarchist Colin Ward argued, behind the setting up of the modern planning system with the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act.



A picture from Colin Ward’s *Arcadia For All*, showing what the great unwashed can get up to when unregulated.

In contrast to the US environmentalism of the period, which was preoccupied with the equally problematic idea of protecting ‘wilderness’, this early English environmentalism had a strong connection with ideas of history and tradition. Neither, however, was significantly motivated by left-wing ideas such as social justice.

The Love of Home

Environmentally-inclined proponents of old-school English conservatism – that is, conservatism that is actually about conserving things – tend to emphasise links between conserving society and conserving nature. Perhaps the leading current exponent of this view is philosopher Roger Scruton. In a passage cited approvingly by Goldsmith and Gummer, he writes:

“Conservatism and conservation are in fact two aspects of a single long-term policy, which is that of husbanding resources. These resources include the social capital embodied in laws, customs and institutions; they also include the material capital contained in the environment, and the economic capital contained in a free but law-governed economy. The purpose of politics, on this view, is not to rearrange society in the interests of some overarching vision or ideal, such as equality, liberty or fraternity. It is to maintain a vigilant resistance to the entropic forces that erode our social and ecological inheritance. The goal is to pass on to future generations, and if possible to enhance, the order and equilibrium of which we are the temporary trustees.”²

Scruton may well be familiar to readers of *The Land*. In issue 9, after some debate, we published his provocative reflections on foxhunting. Some of his views, for instance on consumerism and on technology, echo perspectives frequently expressed in these pages. Indeed, he writes approvingly of Colin Ward, and of our own Simon Fairlie, because of their encouragement of autonomous local action aimed at reconnecting people with land. However as a (big-and-small-c) Conservative, he combines these views with a strong faith in private ownership, market economics, and strong nation states.

Scruton’s big idea in his recent book *Green Philosophy* is that rather than abstract concepts such as justice, sustainability, or



In the tradition corner (left): Edmund Burke ... and in the revolution corner (right): Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

the intrinsic value of nature, it is the more down-to-earth value of *oikophilia* - love of home - which can really motivate ecologically sustainable behaviour. We feel love and responsibility towards the familiar people and places which make up our home, and it is these feelings of love and responsibility which make us act to protect environmental as well as social components of that home. Contrary to the claims of environmental radicals and left-wing revolutionaries, he says, people are not naturally inclined to have such feelings towards 'the planet' or 'humanity'. We care about what we know about, and environmentalism must build upwards from there, not impose abstract principles from the top down.³

For Scruton, global projects and organisations of all kinds, whether it be the UN, the WTO, Monsanto or Greenpeace, tend to destroy local practices and communities, and therefore to degrade the webs of relationship that protect real environments. He is a strong advocate of bottom-up organisation and local action, emphasising that conserving their local land and ecology is a key part of how well-functioning communities look after each other.

This seems at first glance all pretty plausible, apart perhaps from the bit about global NGOs, though these do certainly have critics on the left as well. But a second glance reveals the awkward fact that it is a philosophy which also explicitly seeks to conserve existing inequalities and power structures. Scruton's favoured examples of local action are drawn from the CPRE and the Women's Institute, not from landless peasants' movements, or even the Ramblers Association. We are talking about Conservatism, after all.

The Dead, the Living and the Unborn

Scruton does have a rationale for wanting to conserve privilege, and it is a rationale with a distinguished pedigree. Like Goldsmith and Gummer, he is particularly inspired by Edmund Burke. Burke's best-known work railed against the egalitarianism of the French Revolution and the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which had done so much to inspire it. As suggested by the quote above, Scruton agrees with Burke that reshaping society in pursuit of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* is a very bad idea.

To Rousseau's key idea of society as a contract between equals, Burke famously retorted that a well-functioning society should in fact be seen as a contract not just between present people, but between the living, the dead and the as yet unborn. Scruton argues persuasively that there are strong parallels between this sort of long-term thinking and the core idea of sustainability.

"The living may have an interest in consuming the earth's resources, but it was not for this that the dead laboured. And the unborn depend upon our restraint. Long-term social equilibrium, therefore, must include ecological equilibrium. This thesis, which environmentalists are apt to express in terms of 'sustainability', is better expressed in Burke's way. For Burke reminds us of a motive that arises naturally in human beings, and which can be exploited for the wider purpose of environmental and institutional conservation: namely, love."⁴

For Burke, respect for the dead meant maintaining the hereditary principle by which their wealth and property pass down through the generations. Confiscating private property in a misguided attempt to redistribute wealth and create equality (as in the French Revolution), meant disrespecting the dead and destroying the legacy which would have provided for their descendants. Squandering this legacy of well-managed institutions and properties would inevitably lead to a worse outcome, both for individuals and for the nation as a whole.

Patriotism or Internationalism

A person inheriting property which they expect to pass on to their grandchildren is perhaps naturally inclined to long-term thinking, and this may well feed through into how they treat the land. It is not surprising that even today, some of the best-conserved land and forestry in England arguably lies behind the walls of large private estates, whose owners have for generations thought much like Burke. But for the less privileged, in any age, it's always been much harder to see this Burkean idea of an intergenerational contract based on property rights as an attractive or ethically compelling proposition.

Scruton acknowledges that the hereditary principle is a hard sell these days, and that without it, it's not quite as easy to

say what would provide the motivation to keep the contract between generations going.

His answer, of which Burke would probably have approved, is to extend localism into nationalism. He encourages us to extend the ideas of family and community out to the level of the nation state: shared ideas of home and territory are for Scruton the defining characteristics of a nation. On this model, the 'ancestors' and 'descendants' with whom we have a 'contract' are the past and future inhabitants of 'our country'. We and they are bound together by sharing a home which we love.

In the end, at anything beyond the very local level, the public spiritedness which motivates environmental action relies for Scruton on a sense of patriotism. Moreover, he claims, since international politics will in reality always be about balancing the interests of nation states, it is only by nations that *global* environmental concerns can in any case ever really be addressed.

Of course, the opposite view would be that in reality, modern nation states are not at all like idealised local communities in which people look after each other. With a very few exceptions, they have always been created and maintained by force, ruled by elites, and characterised by massive internal inequalities. Furthermore, competition between them is a major driver of ecological destruction.

For many people, it is simply not true that national loyalties are compelling. Some identify themselves more strongly as members of regional, ethnic, or religious groups. Some are split between two or more nations, and many displaced people are not really welcomed anywhere. For the less privileged, ideals of global human solidarity, which transcend borders drawn and enforced by the powerful, can be a far stronger motivation than patriotism.

Nor is it necessarily the case that we cannot have feelings of *oikophilia* towards the earth as a whole. Many people do genuinely seem to identify with the idea of the planet as home. Of course, there are problems with this idea - not least the dangers of homogenising cultures and downplaying differences - but it is much more of a real motivation than Scruton allows.

This is of course precisely why people join and identify with the global movements for ecological and social justice which Scruton so distrusts. Yes, they are in part motivated by apparently abstract ideas such as sustainability, justice and equality - but history shows that these ideas are much *less* abstract when viewed from within situations of manifest unsustainability, injustice, or inequality.

Moreover, the important idea of taking the dead and unborn into account in our decision-making need not be framed in terms of private property relations, as it was for Burke. For many traditional and indigenous societies this idea was (and remains) central, but has little or nothing to do with preserving power relations and individual property. In fact, it has everything to do with maintaining the health of the commons.

Seen this way, an intergenerational contract need not be incompatible with egalitarianism, and indeed only a mistaken emphasis on private property would make it seem so. The idea of protecting the global commons, and ensuring equal access for all, can easily be criticised as unrealistic or idealistic. But it is no more so than the idea that patriotic loyalty to competing nation states can lead to ecological sustainability.

Resisting Change

This old-school conservatism, then, is decidedly and proudly non-egalitarian. This makes it unattractive (putting it mildly) to anyone who does believe that politics should involve working to reduce inequality. But does this necessarily mean it cannot effectively protect the natural environment?

The role of the state, on this view, is largely to protect the status quo - to resist and contain change. In fact this is potentially quite an effective basis for environmental regulation and policy-making, when what is required really is the 'conservation' of something existing and threatened.

Similarly at the grassroots level, conservative environmentalism is at its most effective when resisting new developments at the local level, whether they be roads, supermarkets, or railways. Scruton is surely right that much of what is often described as "nimbyism" can be more charitably interpreted as *oikophilia*. Most radical campaigners have had the experience of being impressed by dedication (and organisational abilities) of local residents facing the destruction of familiar and well-loved environments, despite the political divide that often separates the two groups on other issues.

Conservative *oikophilia* is not so effective, however, when ecological sustainability requires *new* measures or practices, such as reducing demand for energy, or shifting traffic from private cars onto public transport. In such cases the conservative presumption against change usually works against effective environmental policy-making, whether in local government or at national level.

On the ground, determined local residents of a conservative bent will organise just as effectively against wind farms and 'low impact developments' as they will against bypasses. More broadly, there seems no obvious reason why people motivated *only* by local considerations should embrace the kind of lifestyle changes required to address the bigger picture of global sustainability.

Economics

When it comes to economics, the difference between old and new varieties of Conservatism is particularly stark. Influenced by the earlier work of Friedrich Hayek, the no-holds-barred deregulation and privatisation agenda of Milton Friedman's Chicago school, which swept to power with Thatcher and Reagan, was a major departure from the more cautious bank-manager capitalism of earlier "one nation" Tories. This led to some ironic contradictions, not least the spectacle of a grocer's daughter presiding over the triumph of the supermarkets and the associated demise of family-owned local shops.⁵

Scruton's economics in *Green Philosophy* seem similarly at odds with his professed values, based as they are on the market fundamentalism of Hayek, backed up with dubious studies from neoliberal ideologues at the American Enterprise Institute, where he holds the post of 'resident scholar'.

Strongly against state ownership or "interference" in the economy, he has a remarkably strong faith in the idea that a 'free market' economy is a homeostatic (self-regulating) system, and suggests that environmentalists would be better advised to put their faith in this sort of self-regulation than in appealing "non-sense" such as Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis.⁶

Yet the last thirty years has surely shown that 'free' markets are far from homeostatic. Hayekian deregulation and privatisation has created chaos, not stability, both in human society and in the natural world. It has certainly been hopeless at conserving either social cohesion or the natural environment, and it increasingly targets environmental regulation as an obstacle to growth. Announcing a relaxation of carbon strategy at the 2011 Conservative party conference, George Osborne was cheered as he declared "we're not going to save the planet by putting our country out of business." It seems odd that this kind of economics should be embraced by anyone calling themselves 'conservative', since it does not conserve anything other than the power of capital.

Conservatism driven by such thinking is even more non-egalitarian than Burke's version, as it tends to concentrate wealth in ever fewer hands. The role of the state on this view is, pretty much, simply to enforce the law, provide 'security', and promote economic growth by ensuring that markets remain 'free'. This means that unlike a Burkean state, it has no problem in principle with change, and tends in fact to emphasise the need for constant innovation as a source of growth. It has no interest in conserving anything, unless doing so will provide profit and business opportunities.

Its approach to achieving environmental goals, to the extent that it is interested in doing so, is therefore to make them artificially profitable, by means of attaching financial values to environmental indicators, and introducing convoluted and counter-productive schemes like carbon trading. Even when they are sincerely pursued, such policies are ineffective as well as filled with contradictions. To his credit, Scruton rejects this approach, favouring for instance a flat tax on carbon. He does not however acknowledge that this 'financialisation' of the environment is a clear consequence of the aggressively growth-focussed economics he appears to endorse.

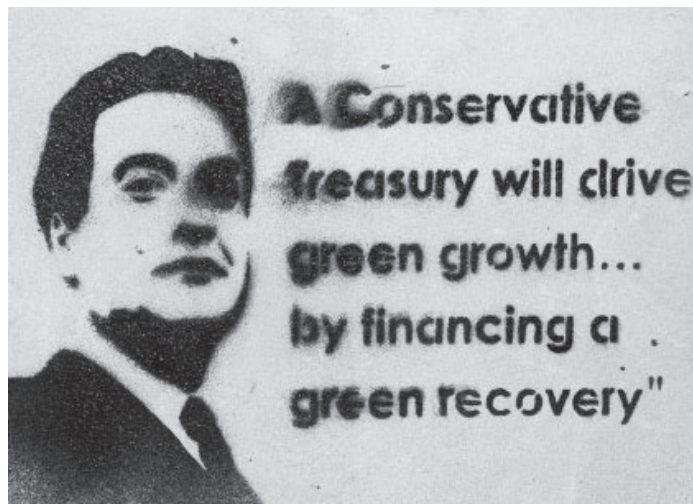
Sharing

Perhaps then, whether or not 'green conservatism' makes sense simply comes down to whether or not you believe in sharing things out equally. Caring about the environment doesn't necessarily imply that you are an egalitarian. One thing that unites conservatives, whether of the 'old' or 'new' varieties, is that they are not. Very broadly speaking, they tend to think that things should be distributed more according to 'what people deserve' than according to some idea of 'fair shares'. Some of them may have their own green utopias, but these are not places where distributive equality is a guiding principle.

However, on this finite planet, environmental issues are more and more inseparable from distribution issues. The key question is very often 'how is access to resources shared between people?', whether the resource in question be food, water, land, oil, or biodiversity. Right-wing environmentalisms, old and new, largely refuse to acknowledge this connection. This means that they avoid considering the disastrous environmental effects of existing inequalities and power structures, and thereby fail to address the root causes of many environmental problems.

Land

How does all this apply to land? Egalitarianism is particularly important when thinking about land, firstly because of the obvious massive scale of the inequalities, and of the suffering that



Not quite Banksy: on the eve of the 2011 Budget, activists from Climate Rush reminded George Osborne of his broken pre-election promise to deliver a properly-funded Green Investment Bank by spraying his words on the wall of the Treasury. Presumably the black eye was a smudge rather than a threat.

these have caused. In this respect we should surely listen not to Burke but to Rousseau's famous words from his 1754 *Discourse on Inequality*:

"The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said "This is mine," and found people naïve enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody."

There is also a practical issue here. Much as Scruton might wish to attribute the post-war destruction of the English countryside to state interference and EU subsidies, the consolidation of ownership is also greatly to blame. Inequitably large holdings the world over are associated with loss of local expertise, unsustainable industrial agriculture, involuntary urbanisation, deforestation, and other assorted environmental devastation.

The land grabs described elsewhere in this issue amply illustrate another well-established consequence of applying global market economics to land. Things which investors can't do at home get done on cheaper less-regulated land somewhere else, irrespective of what local people there want, even though they also love their home.

Such excesses are on the face of it more the consequence of Osborne's variety of conservatism than that of Scruton or Goldsmith. But unfortunately, in practice their shared assumptions mean that all too often the one shades into the other.

References

- 1 Online at www.conservatives.com/pdf/blueprintforagreeneconomy.pdf (not to be confused with Pearce et al.'s 1989 book of the same name).
- 2 Scruton, R. 2006 *Conservatism* in Dobson & Eckersley (eds.) *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, Cambridge University Press, page 8.
- 3 Scruton, R. 2012 *Green Philosophy: how to think seriously about the planet* Atlantic Books.
- 4 *Conservatism* (as note 2 above) page 10.
- 5 For discussion of the takeover of the Conservative Party by neoliberal Hayekians, see John Gray's *Enlightenment's Wake* (Routledge, 1995).
- 6 *Green Philosophy* pages 96 & 255.