

## The Green conservatism project

The Green conservatism project is part of Green Roots, a wider Green Alliance programme which looks at the relationship between the values and priorities of the UK's three main political traditions – conservatism, liberalism and social democracy, and their support for the development of a greener economy. Green Alliance is non-partisan and supports a politically pluralist approach to greening the economy and restoring natural systems.

Many political scientists consider the environment to be an issue similar to health and education where voters judge the likely competence of a party if it were in power, and where most voters want similar outcomes. In such issues parties tend to avoid taking sharply contrasting 'pro' or 'anti' positions.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless the way environmental outcomes are achieved, and even understood, will differ depending on how individual parties view the confluence of their values with environmental solutions. There is also a risk that as environmental policy begins to impinge on significant economic decisions, such as the transformation of transport and energy infrastructure, there will be less common ground between parties.

The two-year Green Roots programme will work with advisory groups made up of independent experts and supporters of each political tradition, including parliamentarians, policy experts and academics, to explore how the UK's main political traditions can address environmental risks and develop distinct responses which align with their values.

## The conservative tradition

Much conservative thinking questions the need for ideology, which makes it harder to define and broader than some other political traditions. The political scientist Philip Norton has argued that "*British Conservatism has some resemblance to the British Constitution in that there is no single document...rather its key tenets have to be drawn from different sources.*"<sup>2</sup> He suggests that conservatives consider themselves as being rooted in the concrete and common-sensical and that "*there is scepticism of the power of man's reason, and mistrust therefore of the abstract, of grand designs divorced from experience.*"<sup>3</sup>

Certain themes occur frequently in the conservative tradition, including acknowledgement of human limitations, belief in the organic society, and deep respect for tradition, authority and property. The academic Andrew Heywood condenses conservative concepts of human limitation and necessary authority and states that: "*Humans can only be persuaded to behave in a civilised fashion if they are deterred from expressing their violent and antisocial impulses.*"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Carter, 2006, *Party politicisation of the environment in Britain*, *Party Politics*, Vol 12, Issue 747

<sup>2</sup> Philip Norton, 2008, *The future of Conservatism*, *Political Quarterly*, Vol 79, Issue 3

<sup>3</sup> Philip Norton, 2008, *The future of Conservatism*, *Political Quarterly*, Vol 79, Issue 3

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Heywood 1998, *Political ideologies: an introduction*

This depiction of conservatism has been challenged by the rise of the New Right over the last half century, rejecting traditional conservative ideas of authority and embracing a more liberal concept of the importance of the individual and economic openness.

## Conservatism and the environment

Conservatives identify the environment as a common good, inherited by all, that fits within the Burkean tradition of generational responsibility. Burke's concept of society as a partnership between "those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born" remains the most powerful conservative argument for environmental stewardship.

In 1989, Margaret Thatcher said of climate change, "We need our reason to teach us today that we are not - that we must not try to be - the lords of all we survey. We are not the lords, we are the Lord's creatures, the trustees of this planet, charged today with preserving life itself - preserving life with all its mystery and all its wonder."

Conservatism, as described by Thatcher, believes that citizens need to be involved in both the enjoyment and the protection of the environment, rather than handing on that responsibility to another generation or process. It was in this context that Britain's first white paper on the environment, *Our Common Inheritance*, was published by the Thatcher government in 1990, which clearly stated, "We have a moral duty to look after our planet and hand it on in good order to future generations."

The philosopher Roger Scruton has argued that the conservative tradition is the only solution to habitat protection, resource protection and climate change, because only conservatism can find a way to answer these issues as they occur, at a local level, rather than removing responsibility by binding them to a hierarchical, bureaucratic process.

Another key argument of conservatives is that they trust empirical evidence over transitory political bias. Roger Scruton's response articulates this: "The problem of clean energy is first and foremost a scientific problem. It will be solved by well-funded scientists working in an atmosphere of free enquiry."

Similarly, Margaret Thatcher's speech on climate change to the UN in 1989 laid out the need for hard-headed belief in science, as well as the need to respond to evidence once gathered: "Darwin's voyages were among the high-points of scientific discovery. They were undertaken at a time when men and women felt growing confidence that we could not only understand the natural world but we could master it, too. Today, we have learned rather more humility and respect for the balance of nature. But another of the beliefs of Darwin's era should help to see us through - the belief in reason and the scientific method."

A conservative recognition of man's fallibility is sometimes used to support inaction, however Nassim Nicholas Taleb has highlighted the need for insurance against risk and the conservative case for environmental protection, "to avoid releasing pollutants in the atmosphere, on the basis of ignorance, regardless of current expert opinion."<sup>5</sup>

*Our Common Inheritance* encapsulated the balance conservatives have always drawn between environmental stewardship and economic prosperity. It stated that "We need growth to give us the means to live better and healthier lives... [but] we must not sacrifice our future well-being for short-term gains." The best instruments for achieving this balance, according to the white paper, are regulation and

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<sup>5</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, 2009, *Huffington Post*

market signals. Government is not there to foist bureaucracy onto the governed, but to provide the secure framework which allows individuals to develop appropriate answers at a local level.

This is the context in which Sir Anthony Eden's government passed the Clean Air Act in 1956, balancing the environmental impact of our cities against the benefits of industrialisation. The same philosophy led to the introduction of green belts in 1955, and, more recently, its support for binding carbon budgets.

When he was elected leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron emphasised his vision of conservatism seen through an environmental prism. As Philip Norton states, Cameron placed "an emphasis on values that are shared by electors... of the need to preserve the environment and to embrace a sense of social responsibility... The stance he is taking can be justified in terms of Tory values, of preserving one's inheritance, the physical fabric of our society, to be protected and nurtured for future generations."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Norton, 2008, *The Future of Conservatism*, *Political Quarterly*, Vol 79, Issue 3