

# Breaking ground

◀ maintain the tax base in the face of globalisation – for example, when people are trading in internet currencies, which have no fixed abode and are effectively untraceable and untaxable?”

I think the way forward is the one that many people have discussed in great detail, which is a gradual shift from the taxation of employment to the taxation of resources.

PG We've seen a number of books published recently that ask who own things – the sun, Scotland, the sky, Britain – but it seems to me that the underlying philosophical and moral issues are more clearly exposed when we ask the big question: who does own the world?

GM The short answer is no-one, and the second short answer is everyone!

And this, in a way, takes us back to the issue of stewardship and ecological justice. One thing we have to recognise is that, as far as the world is concerned,

**We have to ensure this becomes a world for all its people, not just a few**

we are the froth on the surface. We are of extremely little consequence in the wider scheme of things. So our starting point has to be one of humility – that we're just a collection of extremely complex chemicals subject to the same entropic forces as every other collection of chemicals on earth – and that from dust we came and to dust we shall return.

Having said that, our collection of chemicals has achieved such complexity we are able to feel a huge range of emotions, which include pain as well as pleasure, to inflict appalling suffering on others, to deprive people of an ability to keep themselves alive, and to ensure that their lives are enjoyable. So while our duty to the world is perhaps up for debate – simply because we are such puny fragments of cosmic matter – our duty to each other is very clear indeed: to ensure that all the six billion or so people on earth can live decent and comfortable lives.

And that means we have to restrain those who have seized a disproportionate share of the world's resources. We have to remove some of the resources from their hands, and redistribute them to other people. And we have to ensure that this becomes a world for all of its people, not just a fortunate few. **L&L**  
[www.monbiot.co.uk](http://www.monbiot.co.uk)

## Pay to pollute

The Earth has just 50 years before it is overwhelmed by catastrophic ecological disaster, warns environmental charity WWF UK. Here Peter Gibb argues for new social institutions to save the planet, and investigates an inspired proposal to make industrial polluters pay for the damage they cause.

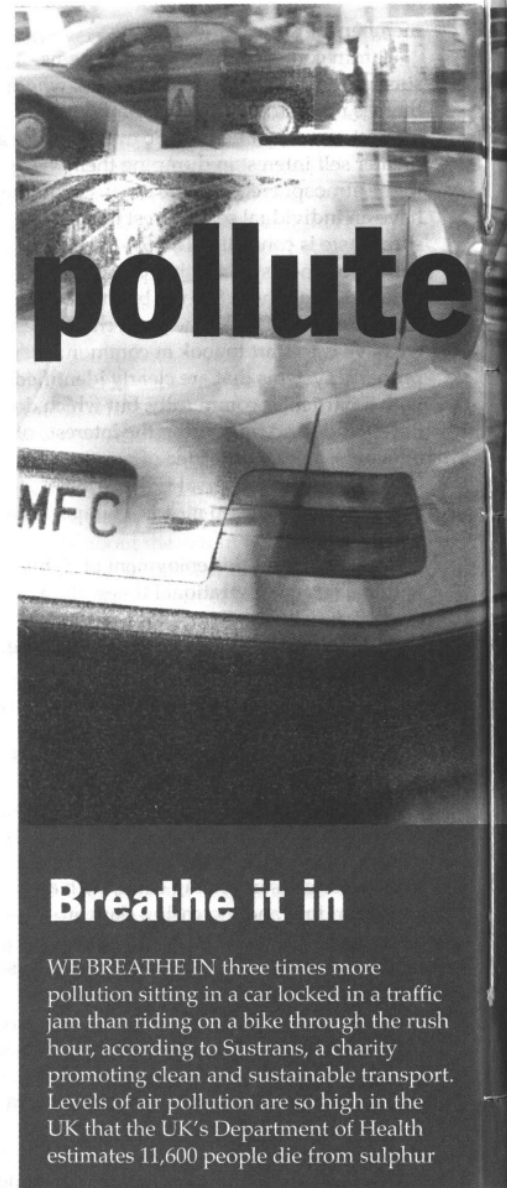
**Ciaran Jennings** reveals the disturbing extent of the problem facing people in the UK

WE LIVE IN a time of unparalleled change. The familiar social institutions within which we grew up, and in which we now participate as adults, are not what once they were.

It has always been the case that our institutions shift and change shape, develop and decline, supplant and finally are supplanted. As the American poet James Russell Lowell once wrote:

*When the travail of the Ages wrings  
earth's systems to and fro;  
New occasions teach new duties; Time  
makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still, and onward,  
who would keep abreast of Truth.*

The 'truth' and the 'good' of an age must manifest themselves in its social institutions. Today our 'earth's systems', in terms of both



### Breathe it in

WE BREATHE IN three times more pollution sitting in a car locked in a traffic jam than riding on a bike through the rush hour, according to Sustrans, a charity promoting clean and sustainable transport. Levels of air pollution are so high in the UK that the UK's Department of Health estimates 11,600 people die from sulphur

natural and human ecology, are being 'wringed' to the point of imminent rupture.

Society's institutions are now changing to a degree and at a rate that is unprecedented. It seems that much of our social landscape will become unrecognisable in our lifetime. What might the new landscape look like?

Surely it must be: leaving behind the time of statist control, and entering the time of participatory governance; leaving the time of authority and knowledge controlled by cabal, and entering the time of popular enlightenment, empowerment and knowledge accessed by information and technology; leaving the time of work as an inadequate commercial bargain, and entering the time of work as a gift; leaving the time of community as a fiscal burden to be borne, and



Air pollution is estimated to kill 11,600 people in the UK annually

dioxide and deadly particles each year. This does not include the 14,000 admitted to hospital suffering from pollution-related respiratory illnesses. The "external" costs of traffic, including health and congestion, have been estimated by the World Health Organisation as 4.1% of the European Union's gross domestic product making this as much an economic as well as a health issue.

As well as the industrial pollution that

adds to damage caused by car exhaust there is also agricultural pollution. The UK Government recently climbed down over proposals to protect all the countryside from nitrate pollution. This move came in the face of stiff opposition from farmers unwilling to be saddled with the cost of controlling their pollution. Excess nitrate from heavy fertiliser use pollutes drinking water supplies and kills life in rivers.

Ciaran Jennings

entering the time of community as rewarding covenant.

New institutions are emerging and coming to serve us to these ends. Some provide us with new social places, like the internet and worldwide web. Some give us new social structures, like the global jurisdiction to be exercised by the International Criminal Court. Some provide new social mechanisms, like local and multiple currencies and other systems of exchange. Some provide new social functions, like the collection and divvying of the rental value of our common resources. The process of change is evolutionary. The potential for reform to the ends of justice is revolutionary.

Consider our individual participation in the common inheritance of nature and

community. We are beginning to understand again that the earth is the common property of all life. As this becomes more widely seen to be the truth, there will be popular demand for practical reform and we might wonder what is the best means of achieving equity.

The co-opting of the state to the task of instituting that equity in our enjoyment of our birthright may not necessarily be the right solution. It is by no means certain that 'government' is the proper clearing house of the common dividend of life.

It seems possible that new and dedicated social institutions will emerge for the purpose of manifesting that new understanding and popular demand, and for realising the necessary new social functions. The Sky Trust (right) is one such proposal.

## The Sky Trust

PROPOSED BY ENTREPRENEUR Peter Barnes, the Sky Trust is a new institution for social, economic and environmental purposes.

Neither a private nor governmental entity, it would sit within our social structure's civil sector. The Trust would be made up of an international board of trustees, with a minimal supporting secretariat and access to scientific and economic advice.

The Trust's purpose would be to ensure that a certain benefit of nature was shared equally among all. And at the same time reduce the greenhouse gas emissions currently threatening the world's climate.

The Trust would work as a 'cap-and-trade system' of pollution licensing, seeking to 'cap' pollution – by limiting the issue of pollution permits and allowing for the free 'trade' of those permits. Those who pollute less could gain by selling to those who pollute more. Permits are fixed term and the Trust collects their value set by the market through periodic reissues.

The Trust's operation would reduce climate-threatening atmospheric pollution through 'internalising' pollution's cost to the industry generating the damage – a cost presently 'externalised' from its balance sheets. Thus the sky's ability to absorb carbon emissions could be regulated. Pollution would never exceed that level from which the atmosphere could recover.

"Initial emission rights are given to a trust, which periodically sells them to polluters and distributes the revenue to all citizens equally," says Barnes. He views the Trust as "a scarcity rent recycling machine".

"We, the users, pay scarcity rent for the sky because it's scarce. We, the owners, then get back our share of the scarcity rent because we're the owners.

"The Sky Trust's mission would be to preserve the mix of gases in the sky [upon which life depends]. Its trustees would be accountable not only to citizens alive today, but also to citizens yet unborn. They'd have three legal responsibilities: to issue carbon burning permits up to a limit established [democratically]; to receive market prices for those permits; and to distribute the income equally [among all citizens].

"These responsibilities are consistent to a remarkable degree. In the event there were a conflict between the trustees' responsibilities, preservation of the sky would take precedence."

The Trust would offer an economic solution to a vast environmental problem. [www.SkyOwners.org](http://www.SkyOwners.org)

Photography/illustration: Lucy Glover