

GREEN ENLIGHTENMENT

THE electoral success of Britain's Green Party during this year's Euro-elections (they took 15% of the vote) sent the orthodox politicians reeling.

The Greens enlisted the sympathies of a large slice of Margaret Thatcher's traditional Conservative support, and managed to slash the electoral strength of other minority parties.

The Greens believe that a new awareness about the need to protect the environment is surging through the clogged arteries of the political system. That, they say, is why the major parties are now developing fresh policies of their own on major issues such as industrial pollution and conservation of the countryside.

And at their annual conference in Wolverhampton in September, the party displayed its policy wares. One of these was highlighted by Sara Parkin, one of the party's joint leaders (and the Media's favourite spokesperson: she is regarded as tele-visual).

"Some of our policies that used to be dismissed as off the wall are now positively mainstream," she declared in the opening speech. "Land value tax, for example," she said, which the Greens call the Community Ground Rent (CGR).

She cited Australian and Taiwan empirical evidence in favour of the tax, and pointed out that the UN recommends the fiscal policy as an integral part of land reform for Third World countries.

Mrs Parkin is not of the old school of politics. She is generous in her praise of other politicians; for example, she acknowledges that Prime Minister Thatcher is sincere in her statements about the need to protect the environment.

But Mrs Parkin, who lives with her husband in Lyon, France, has no doubt that it will take a government which included members of the Green Party to implement policies that would radically change the social and economic structure of society. *Policies such as the tax on land values.*

IN THEIR *Manifesto for a Sustainable Society* 1989, the Green Party makes it plain that policies which address the tenure and taxation of land are prerequisites for ecological salvation. "Without this, the economic pressures of the present land system (including land speculation) will defeat all attempts to remedy ecological and allied problems," the party declares bluntly.

Nor do the Greens talk about taking a small proportion of the annual rental value of land, though they do not specify the tax rate. "Ultimately, the collection rate will be increased to the highest practicable proportion of the full economic rent."

Their starting point is that land is the common heritage of mankind, and it is wrong for a minority of people to monopolise a community's land (in Britain, they say, 52% of the land is owned by 1% of the population).

Nonetheless, they are willing to entertain the proposal for compensation. "Payment of an annuity to existing freeholders, subject to a low ceiling on total value, could be seen as an acceptable compromise."

The Greens have devised an attractive formula for selling this new tax: they say that revenue from CGR should be used to guaran-



• Natives content in their rain forest: should we pay rent to preserve nature?

tee that everyone received a Basic Income. That would remove poverty, but the income would not be stigmatised as charitable hand-outs from the hard-earned incomes of taxpayers. If land is everyone's natural heritage, it follows that we are all entitled to share in its value!

To facilitate the tax, the Greens propose that land registers should contain publicly-accessible information about ownership and rental values; and regular revaluations would ensure that the tax fell on the current market value of all sites.

IS THE land value tax really now a mainstream policy, as Mrs Parkin claims? Not in terms of British politics, for the Liberal Democrats are the only other party currently interested in the policy (see story, right).

But the idea of redistributing rental values has become a "hot" issue within the global context, articulated in terms of the need to conserve the environment.

- Brian Johnson, forestry consultant to the Worldwide Fund for Nature, argues that "we must be prepared to pay rent for the services we get from [rain] forests."

- Officials of the European Commission earlier this year proposed a form of rental levy: a Carbon tax, the proceeds of which would be devoted to measures to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

- The Brazilian government is toying with the idea of charging the world a "rent" for the benefit of preserving the rain forests of the Amazon. This dovetails with the plan devised by financier Sir James Goldsmith, who proposed that an international organisation, Forestco, should be created to rent rain forests. Host countries would have some of their international debt written off in return for agreeing to preserve the rain forest.

- Academic experts have proposed variations on these themes – and as Mr Johnson notes: "The era of international bargaining over ecological rent, however organised and paid, has already begun."

Estimates of the value of these natural resources are being