

HOW GREEN ARE THE LIBERALS?

AS SIR William Harcourt didn't say, "We are all environmentalists now". The world's population, which reached two milliards when the 20th century was already well advanced, now probably far exceeds four milliards, and will very likely attain six milliards before the century is out. Most of those people now expect to live longer, and at far higher standards, than all previous generations.

So we are pressing harder and harder on a diminishing natural environment. Britain is feeling the problem with particular acuteness. We are, after all, the world's greatest working museum of industrial archaeology, suffused with obsolete industries, obsolete housing, and obsolete attitudes. People with very disparate political and social opinions are united in a growing concern to do something about all this before we all get buried under our own effluent.

The Liberal Party has recently brought out a Discussion Paper on the subject. Like the curate's egg, it is excellent in parts, but is hard to summarise fairly because it contains many different proposals, dealing with a variety of separate problems. The underlying principle is clearly and unexceptionably stated:

"We want to create a world which can continue to provide for future generations the kind of environmental choices with which we ourselves would be satisfied... Our aim must be to achieve a sustainable society in which the activities of mankind develop in equilibrium with nature as a whole, neither using resources faster than they can be replaced nor creating effects or products that cannot be assimilated indefinitely by the environment."

So far, so good.

The section on land use gene-

By Roy Douglas

rates several useful ideas. Planning authorities, the suggestion goes, should not release green field sites for development when alternatives are on the register: a policy which would simultaneously discourage further destruction of the countryside and encourage the revitalisation of derelict inner-city areas.

VAT should be changed. At present, new building work is free of VAT, while most work on existing buildings carries that iniquitous tax. How absurd, the Liberals point out, to encourage people to encroach on new sites, and to discourage them from making good use of existing structure! Several other good ideas emerge from this section — such as encouragement for community groups which seek to improve existing housing and to develop new sites, and the establishment of more open spaces in urban areas.

Elsewhere in the Paper, the Liberals give abundant evidence that their hearts are in the right place. They want, for example, to help the small farmer against those awful *latifundia* generated by protectionist economics and the EEC; they want stronger measures against pollution; they want spending to be switched from nuclear research into the development of "alternative energy sources" and conservation. Animals matter as well as people. The Liberal group opposes all hunting with hounds, and they would ban importation of all seal and whale products.

An even simpler, but probably very effective, reform which they propose, is that all animal products should be labelled to indicate the methods of production.

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Lots of people would be very shocked to learn the size of cage in which battery chickens spend their brief, unhappy lives; or what happens to a farrowing sow.

The same approach, radical and humane, is applied throughout the Paper. One rejoices to read that "The UK aid programme... and expertise should be directed to promoting resource-conserving technologies and sustainable agricultural practices. European markets must be opened to more imports from primary producers in the Third World." Do I detect just one scintilla of doubt about the EEC?

Yet there are two big defects in this Discussion Paper. In the first place, like many political documents, it tends to use words like "encourage" and its opposite without explaining too clearly what they will mean in practice. Do they imply subsidies from public funds, differential taxation, criminal penalties, or what? In some places we are told; in others we are not. No politician should be allowed to get away with such words without explaining exactly what he means by them.

A second defect is astonishing. Liberals have officially supported the taxation of land values for nearly a century, and LVT argue that this policy would be of considerable value in fostering the results which these Liberal environmentalists plainly desire. It would, for example, tend to reduce encroachments on the countryside, and to resist inner-city decay; and it would encourage the small farmer who makes the best possible use of every acre.

So why are the Liberals not shouting LVT from the housetops in a document like this? The policy is not mentioned once from start to finish. Am I justified in the suspicion that the authors don't even know what the policy is, and still less have thought out what effects it might have?

the minimisation of competition through the provision of unique services — produces diversity, stability and productivity. This is how the Earth supports five or 10 million species, mainly small, each making its own living, wrestling the maximum biomass from the resources available. Only the intervention of Man, with his

special dispensation, threatens that process.

The one substantial criticism of free trade in Stewart and Ghani's paper is that it involves "technological dependence... because it is necessary for countries to keep up with... technology change, if they are to compete internationally."

They quote the example of the Intermediate Technology Group's attempt to produce a small scale, low cost egg-tray packing machine. It was found that in the end the only competitive model was as "inappropriate" as those they were trying to replace.

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