

The Greens: An Introduction

David Orton

The green movement is a growing part of the broader environmental movement. David Orton is a green activist living in Saltsprings, Nova Scotia. Here, he outlines some of the prospects and problems of the green movement and puts forward some of the challenges which that movement places before environmentalists, both on a national level and in his own province.

A certain TV amphibian will be forever remembered for the expression, "It's not easy being green." Well, it's not easy *defining* "green" either. Describing what it means to be green in the Maritimes – and in Canada and elsewhere, too – and outlining what the green movement and green political parties are all about are difficult tasks fraught with the danger of misrepresentation. Although it's probably safe to say that there is one basic tenet shared by all greens – that the Earth must be put first in all our thinking and action – there is also an ongoing and evolving debate about other basic values and philosophies. Greens come from a variety of backgrounds which colour the perspectives they bring to the movement, so there is a healthy diversity of views. My outlook – I come from a background of left-wing political activism, have been involved with the environmental movement for well over a decade and have publicly identified myself as a green since 1983 – is only one of a number that are contending for philosophical ground within the green movement.

In addition to these theoretical debates, there is also a lot of practical discussion going on in the green movement about a number of other questions. How should greens respond to the increasing international public sentiment in favour of green ideas? (In one dramatic example of this upsurge of support, the Green Party in the United Kingdom came out of obscurity last year to gain about fifteen percent of the vote in elections to the European Parliament.) How should green political parties relate to the environmental and green movements? What posture should they take toward other political parties? How can it be assured that green parties are democratic and what practices should be used to make sure women and men participate on a basis of equality? Divergent answers to these and other questions are being framed in an atmosphere of growing force for greens, as public consciousness moves toward a new green philosophy.

Greens and Environmentalists

There's no simple litmus test for "greenness." While it is fair to say that every green is an environmentalist, it doesn't work the same way in reverse: many people in the Maritimes take an interest in environmental issues and yet don't see themselves as part of the green movement. You can take your collection of daily papers to a recycling depot and call yourself an "environmentalist," but it requires much more than this to be a "green." Many environmentalists are willing to work to put a stop to this or that abuse in the belief that the existing political and economic system can be reformed – if only the "political will" can be summoned. On the other hand, greens see deeper relationships among all environmental issues and feel that basic political changes are necessary to resolve problems of environmental concern. We feel that the Earth is being destroyed as a result of human activities and that only basic political and economic changes – changes requiring a shift in our entire paradigm of values – can do anything about it. We are by nature internationalists because the destruction taking place, in

both socialist and capitalist societies, recognizes no political borders. Greens see all existing political parties, on both left and right, as part of the problem, because they all share a common commitment to economic “growth” and view the world as a pool of “resources” that are simply to be “managed” in our own best interests.

Many people who are now coming to the green movement from a left-wing perspective have a great deal of difficulty breaking with this human-centred value system. I experienced this myself, but have since come to a view that is bio- rather than human-centric – with a socialist component that sees the role capitalist profit plays in environmental destruction – and sees humans as only one life form among many, each of whose existence and survival is as important as our own.

There have been divergent opinions among greens and other environmentalists about the concept of “sustainable development” made popular by the United Nations-sponsored Brundtland Report in 1987. Many greens, myself included, are disappointed by the enthusiasm this concept has aroused among many environmentalists. It seems to us that its advocates fail to see many of its shortcomings, such as its support for continued economic growth based on a human-centred, “resourcist” orientation toward nature, its acceptance of ongoing world population growth, its failure to address the problems of the Third World and its approval of the destructive lifestyle of the “developed,” polluting nations as a model for rest of the world. Brundtland, it appears, is nothing more than a recipe for ecological disaster which somehow reconciles the ecological health of the planet with a five- to ten-fold increase in worldwide manufacturing output. Brundtland’s supporters, however, turn a blind eye to these flaws.

Greens: Parties and Movement

The green movement is still on the periphery of political life in this region: there is only a smattering of greens across the Maritimes and Newfoundland. (In British Columbia, Ontario and Québec greens have a higher profile, but only marginally so.) But a January visit to Nova Scotia of Per Gahrton, Swedish Green Party Member of Parliament and one of four co-secretaries of the alliance of European Greens, was a stimulus to the greening of the province. He met with a number of activists involved in forestry and pesticide issues, addressed about 300 people at two public meetings in Halifax and was the subject of a number of local media interviews.

More and more people are beginning to move the building of a green movement to the top of their personal political agendas. If this undertaking is to be successful we will have to be armed with an understanding of the many problems hampering the development of green movements and their parties on the local, national and international levels. Inevitably, problems and difficulties arise in the building of any new social movement, especially one like the green movement which has a subversive potential to transform the existing political and economic order. A number of worthwhile publications have sprung up – most of them in recent years – to carry on animated discussion and debate about these matters.

It has been in Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand that green movements and parties have been most successful. The establishment in 1981 of *Die Grünen* (“The Greens”) in West Germany and their subsequent dramatic rise to electoral prominence gave heart to greens throughout the world and seems to have been influential in the decision of some people in Canada to form green parties of their own.

In looking back at the international history of the formation of green parties, two different trends are apparent. The first of these was followed in, for example, West Germany, where *Die Grünen* began as a grass-roots movement concerned with matters of peace and ecology – their main issues seem to have been nuclear weapons and power plants – but also having ties to naturalist

and feminist groups and other activists. The German left was part of this movement from the outset. German greens – and their counterparts in Sweden – created political organizations that arose from grassroots green movements, and they began their political battles on the local level before expanding to the larger stage and establishing national parties.

The second trend in party building is perhaps best illustrated by looking at the Canadian model, although this same route was followed by a number of other national green parties. Here in Canada green parties were declared to exist before there was any real green movement rooted in practical struggles and articulating an alternative green vision appropriate to Canadian conditions. (This holds true for the Green Party of Canada, founded in 1983, as well as for provincial parties formed in Ontario, British Columbia, Québec, and, just last year, Newfoundland.) This from-the-top-down method of forming a party prompts the question: can such parties integrate themselves into the environmental and green movements fighting frontline battles and so transform themselves into a conduit for the collective political expression of activists in the field? A look at the literature of these parties indicates, I think, that most of them – particularly the national and British Columbia green parties – seem preoccupied with electoral politics.

Green parties, in Canada and elsewhere, have taken on an enormous burden that sets before them a number of tasks crucial to their future success. Paramount among these are:

- to take the preservation of the ecological integrity of the planet as primary: *all* other concerns must flow from this basic premise. They will also have to address and develop concrete policies on the major social, economic, cultural and political issues of the day;
- getting party members involved in practical environmental struggles and issues. The experience thus gained can then be used to build policies and programs to mobilize the public. Practical, viable policies must be developed on agriculture, energy, the fishery, forestry, wilderness and wildlife – in fact, on all major human interaction with the natural world;
- developing and articulating new social structures that embrace grassroots democracy, are gender-equal and portray a new social order in embryo. A preoccupation with electoral politics – which presupposes a passive public simply sitting on the sidelines – will not get the job done.

Hammering Out a World View

There is a lot of debate among greens about the philosophical underpinnings of our movement. These discussions revolve around the question of what view of the planet we must adopt in order to save it. Various expressions and labels, such as “deep ecology,”* “social ecology,” “eco-feminism” and “socialist bio-centrism” are being discussed and debated. The question of where the green movement fits into the political spectrum has been another important part of this discussion. Many have adopted the slogan “Neither left nor right, but in front.” While this maxim has a negative side – it can convey a sense of hostility to the left, which has itself spawned a number of green activists – there is also a positive aspect to it: it conveys the extreme importance the green movement places on maintaining its organizational and philosophical independence. Perhaps the most important thing to be learned from this slogan – especially by people on the left – is that “going green” involves a complete break with old alliances and thinking. Simply adding “ecology” to a list of one’s concerns is inadequate: it is vital to show by *action* that it has become central to one’s life.

Some Canadian greens have looked for philosophical guidance on basic or core values to *Die Grünen*, which identifies the “four pillars” of its world view as ecology, social concern, grassroots democracy, and non-violence. (There has, though, been a tendency among some to adopt these principles without sufficient deep thought or understanding of their implications. For example, some who espouse a course of strict non-violence are unable to see the inherent

violence of the state that can be brought to bear against those it deems to be “subversive.”) Others have looked to the intellectually vibrant green movement south of the border when groping for an understanding of basic precepts.

Closer to Home

In Nova Scotia, most people on the left have tended to gravitate to the New Democratic Party and have not been very involved in environmental struggles. Although the NDP has historically played a progressive social role in the province, on environmental issues it hasn't really differed fundamentally from the Liberals and Tories. Its tone of comment may be somewhat different, but on recent important ecological matters such as the seal hunt or forest herbicide spraying, there has been little practical difference in the stances of the three parties.

Within the region's environmental movement, little critical discussion has taken place about strategy, tactics or basic philosophies and assumptions. The dominant emphasis has been on lobbying government bureaucrats and politicians. Government and even corporate grants have been sought and received by the larger environmental groups, such as the Halifax-based Ecology Action Centre. Most environmental activists in the province have never questioned the basic tenets of capitalism and have worked to resolve problems “within the system.” No alternative vision of a sustainable society has been put forward: instead, we are urged to participate in this or that “multi-stake” committee where environmentalists have some token representation.

There is, on the other hand, another tendency within the province's environmental movement, but it is at present a minority one. It opposes government or corporate funding of environmental groups because it views these players as the major perpetrators of our ecological problems rather than as a possible solution to them. (Also, paying attention to how an environmental group is financed means having to take heed of the extent of grassroots support an organization really has. Government funding carries with it the potential of cutting off an organization's leadership from its core of supporters.) This minority tendency opposes any environmental group taking upon itself the responsibility of representing and speaking for the environmental movement as a whole. It also views lobbying of government or appeals to the “good will” of polluting corporations as a waste of time. Instead, it puts forward the idea that people have to rely on their own resources and take the protection of the province's environment into their own hands. Perhaps a basic tenet of this tendency is that, if we confine ourselves to legal niceties and standards of “proper” behaviour, we are not going to manage to stop environmental destruction.

An economic system that is based on the never-ending growth of capital must inevitably promote a consumerism without end. But, the forest doesn't stretch on infinitely – it ends just over the next hill; the ocean can't absorb our wastes forever – fish are washing ashore *today*, belly up. We must pass over the teasing temptations of mindless consumerism and power lunches to develop a green economics – an economics freed from the traditional concepts of never-ending growth – which preserves the planet and the welfare of other forms of life, and at the same time assures future human welfare in a global sense.

(* See the [Deep Ecology Platform](#).)

*David Orton is active in the Green Web, an independent research group serving the needs of the green movement. This article was published in the “Soundings” section of **New Maritimes**, May/June, 1990.*

To obtain any of the Green Web publications, write to us at:
Green Web, R.R. #3, Saltsprings, Nova Scotia, Canada, B0K 1P0
E-mail us at: greenweb@ca.inter.net

Back to

[The Green Web](#)

[A Taste of Green Web Writings and Left Biocentrism](#)

[Earlier Green Web publications](#)

http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/The_Greens_Introduction.pdf
Last updated: August 5, 2012