

Is Survival Worth While?

The mood of apprehensive pessimism hanging over Western countries has now passed its third birthday—in the wake of the oil embargo which made us realize that cartels could upset our economic security indefinitely. Since then we have shown ourselves, by and large, to be unable to: control inflation, stop rising unemployment, cope with guerilla and terrorist attacks, stamp out personal and institutional corruption, or persuade our own people that these problems won't just get up and go away. In many countries, moreover, the ability to act is hamstrung by the lack of strong majority governments. Electorate after electorate has chosen to balance right, centre, and left, so closely that indecision becomes the norm.

For those of us who worry about environmental protection, the prospect, in this era of weak government, is dimmer than ever. In many places the public anxiety about the environment seems to have receded—long before protection had been adequately secured. Unemployment, inflation, food and energy supply—all look more important than endangered species, clean rivers, or natural beauty. It is assumed by most politicians—who never really believed in the 'environmental myth', anyway—that public attention is once again focused on the economic and social issues. So with a sigh of relief such politicians turn away from the ecological questions which they never quite understood or sympathized with. Thus some of the will for political action in the environmental arena has evaporated, even in countries where it was once strong.

It is vital that we in the environmental movement realize the weakness of our governmental support—and also the weakness of government itself. Many of us have spent much effort in trying to get sound environmental and resource legislation on to various national statute books. For a few years we had good success, because the public was genuinely alarmed about such matters, and would support suitable measures of law and regulation. But we never really altered the underlying 'certainties' in the minds of most professional politicians, who judged that the concern would evaporate—and who are now pretty sure that it has done so. Moreover we have not made much of a dent in the thinking of that influential academic discipline, economics, whose advice sounds much more palatable than does that of the ecologists.

Where then do we put our effort, if the governmental, legal, and regulatory, route is petering out into a dead end? My own answer is education and the propagation of a suitable ethic. The Chinese have demonstrated that a self-disciplining society can work wonders. So can a 'western' society, if it is united in belief as to really desirable ends. The lack of such a common belief as to the ends of our political, social, and economic, machinery is what weakens western governments.

We have made some progress in the little-tangible area of environmental education. The past decade has seen the world-wide spread, permeation, and elaboration, of the idea that mankind has an obligation to care for the planet, for its living inhabitants, and for the well-being of future generations. This value—actually as old as the hills but still new to many—has not yet acquired much political momentum; but it has sharply influenced the everyday practice of engineers, agriculturists, medical officers, and other professionals. *Over and beyond what the law requires*, these professions have included in their training and practice a greater respect for environmental conservation, and a greater understanding of the wholeness of its problems, than is common in their contemporaries. The engineers graduating from the world's universities today take for granted measures that they would have scoffed at only a decade ago. To me this is the most hopeful avenue to push further along. Perhaps I'm just an over-optimistic educator, but I believe there is evidence to support the view that most advances in public health, hygiene, and environmental protection, owe more to the spread of enlightenment than to formal regulation.

I wish I felt as confident about the spread of an environmental ethic. There are many statements of such an ethic, largely from lay rather than 'priestly' prophets. Aldo Leopold's views are known and respected in many places. A recent restatement by Morse & Chant (1975), in a Canadian official document, is less-widely quoted. Given that one of these authors is an economist, it is perhaps remarkable that they defined the environmental ethic as follows, saying that: 'Every person shall strive to protect and enhance the beautiful everywhere [that] his or her environmental impact is felt, and to maintain or increase the functional diversity of the environment in general', which is a moral imperative rather than an ethic. But other economists have stated the ancient principle of entail or inalienable succession in similarly imperative terms, as for example Pigou (1967): 'It is the clear duty of Government, which is the trustee for unborn generations as well as for its present citizens, to watch over, and if need be by legislative enactment to defend, the exhaustible natural resources of the country from rash and reckless spoliation.'

Ecologists tend to assume that such attitudes are widespread in Man, that they are self-justifying, and may be asserted as self-evident. Social scientists, on the other hand, often call them utopian or altruistic—both of which words are often spoken with a sneer or a giggle. Marxian commentators are hardly less sceptical. So it is comforting to know that a sizable school of modern economics has grown up in the wake of Pigou's decades-old original initiative—though it took the profession thirty years to get started on it!

In any case, this is where I think we must continue to push—to argue that concern for Nature and concern for the future endowment of mankind, are moral imperatives akin to those that for most ordinary citizens regulate family and neighbourhood lives. Mores do change—but only if the convinced persist continuously in trying to convince the unconvinced! Thus we must never relax our efforts, through appropriate education and other means, to convince the world at large of the need of a sound environmental ethic. For only by applying rigid standards based on enlightened consideration in our stewardship of Planet Earth, and at the same time respecting the parts and rights of other biota upon it, can we continue with any real confidence in our 'robust faith in the future of mankind' and so make long-term survival seem worth while.

References

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