



conservative ideology and the environment

Good government has always been concerned with improving quality of life and protecting the security of its present and future citizens. This responsibility to safeguard inherited resources is a classic feature of conservatism that has been associated with the preservation of political and religious institutions, finances, and culture. The same principles apply to the environment.

In the 18th Century, political philosopher Edmund Burke stated that we are 'temporary possessors or life renters' of this world, with a moral obligation not to squander our natural inheritance, lest we 'leave to those who come after...a ruin instead of a habitation.' Our respect for the past and responsibility to future generations informs our duty to conserve our resources and protect the environment. It is a philosophical commitment to taking care of what we have been given, and safeguarding the planet and our country for our grandchildren's children.

However, for centuries, political momentum has been primarily concerned with raising people's standard of living with an overwhelming focus on material advantage; and for the last three decades, the green political terrain has been colonised by the left who, by and large, have squandered their occupation. Their approach has produced much rhetoric, but no progress on anything like the scale required. During that period, the cause of the environment has been seen by turns as niche, outlandish, hostile to western values, and more recently – in a remarkable turnaround - politically expedient.

In reality, today's environmentalism has a long philosophical and political heritage which is in essence conservative, rather than radical. The extent to which the actions now required to enhance the security of our own and future generations appear drastic is a disquieting indication of how far we have collectively lost touch with the conservative tradition.

We have come to a point in history where, as responsible conservatives, we can no longer view 'the good life' so narrowly. Protecting the environment is fundamentally concerned with protecting and improving the quality of people's lives. This means taking responsibility for local environmental problems such as flood risk, graffiti and litter, and defending ourselves against international threats like climate change or energy insecurity.

conservative methodology and the environment

A conservative approach to environmentalism involves marrying the principles of responsibility, conservation and security to an emphasis on the local environment. In this regard the conservative emphasis on community is crucial. Guarding our green spaces, the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land we live and work on- are the priorities that a forum on environmental issues must champion.

The environment is the immediate context of all our lives, influencing the way we behave, the respect we have for our neighbours, whether we have a sense of community at all. In an era of increasing globalisation, where often problems seem too huge, daunting and distant to contemplate, the importance of what we can do for each other locally will only grow.

Local environmental issues are knotty and politically sensitive, but it is vital that politicians strive to reconnect the principles that enliven the green debate to people's everyday concerns and anxieties about the world around them. Localism is not a panacea; but devolving real authority away from Central Government and into local communities will help us to become more socially robust and give us more opportunities to look after the places where we live.

CEN firmly believe that the methods and mechanisms of improvement must be tied to, rather than conflicting with, our way of life. Progress will only come from sensible solutions that harness markets and are predicated on the idea that people should be encouraged to do the right thing. Policy making must take this as its first cue. The need for political and policy leadership is incontestable, but statist penalties and punishments will not bring about the changes we need. We must go with the grain of human nature.

This is the basis for CEN's advocating market-based and sensible environmental reforms. The foundations of our economy have been shaken and the traditional avenues of wealth creation have come under exacting scrutiny. The current climate of economic introspection presents an opportunity to re-engineer the economy with a low carbon future at its core. Indeed, much of the drive to champion the environment now stems from a desire to encourage investment in a new green economy, with compelling arguments in favour of the socio-economic benefits of decarbonisation.

A return to conservative first principles would enable greater coherence in our approach to modern environmental challenges. Policy making, including preserving our natural heritage, safeguarding social justice, greening energy supply, enhancing public health, national security, and economic competitiveness must take into account the fact that there is something innately valuable about the natural world. Protecting and improving the environment should therefore be implicit in every government decision.