

Eu environmental policy criticisms



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EU environmental policy is no environmental policy at all; it is in fact no more than an extension of economic policy. Discuss.

Detailed below is a wide-ranging discussion of the arguments for and against the notion that EU environmental policy is no environmental policy at all and is merely in actuality an extension of the community's economic policy. The EU Commission has certainly made claims about the importance and the extensive scope of its own environmental policy in recent years, especially since the late 1980s. There are arguments that can be made to defend or refute the notion that the EU's environmental policy is not so extensive or indeed as far ranging as it might appear to be. Arguments in favour as well of the idea that environmental policy are only an element or an extension of the EU's economic policy. The links between the EU's environmental and economic policy, as will be discussed, are not necessarily straightforward even if the origins of environmental policy would appear to be so. Due to the founding principles and structures of the EU it could be argued that all non-economic policy areas originally developed from a starting point within the community economy, as it was originally a community that confined its remit to economic policy except in the most exceptional of circumstances.

However, there has been most notably in the form of the EU Commission, elements within the EU that believe the community should have a much wider sphere of policy making than just economic policy. Primarily to drive the integration processes forward and solve any common problems or issues upon a community basis rather than on a national basis.

The origins of EU environmental policy are undeniably rooted in the economic policy of the EU. There are various reasons as to why that is the

case. The EU as an organisation was established to promote strong economic growth within its member states. As far as the founders of the EU were concerned, there was no need to have separate environmental policy as nobody in the 1950s knew or believed that environmental issues were even a concern, let alone of critical importance to the long term future of Europe. The first stepping stone on the way to the formation of the EU was the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952 that integrated coal and steel production in the six original member states. Coal and steel production were regarded as being the most important elements of promoting high levels of growth in Western Europe (Judt, 2007, p. 156). The success of the ECSC led to the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 with an expanded scope to integrate economic policy within the member states. It was an expansion, which led to the introduction of the Common Agricultural Policy to protect the agricultural sectors of the countries within the community. There were obviously environmental consequences of the economic policy pursued by the inception of the community, these were not known (James, 2003, p. 400). The EU and none of its member states had detailed or systematic environmental policy in the 1950s or the 1960s; even if there were any environmental problems those problems would be resolved upon an ad hoc basis. Very few people at that time took a serious view of environmental issues (Thompson, 2001, p. 199). When the EU Commission began to regard environmental issues of being some relevance to the quality of life, it found it difficult to persuade the governments of member states that they needed to take action to improve the environment (Sawka & Stevens, 2000, p. 156). Arguably, it took longer for the EU to develop environmental policy, as its

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member states did not believe that there were any viable reasons for the establishment of such environmental policy. Some governments of the EU member states were more likely to be receptive to the ideas of environmentalist groups than other governments are. For instance, West Germany and the Netherlands (Eatwell & Wright, 2003, p. 233). The EU Commission did regard the development of environmental policy as an addition on to its economic policy, which bore its first fruit in the adoption of an environmental programme in 1972. The first programme aimed at reducing the pollution linked with industrial and agricultural production techniques (Jones et al, 2004 p. 696). In terms of actually helping to improve the environment the early programmes of the EU were limited in outlook and did not have to be fully adopted by the member states of the EU. Certainly when referring to EU environmental policy in the 1970s, claim that EU environmental policy was not policy at all could be fully justified. The EU Commission was well aware at that time as to the limits of its own ability to pursue policy that diverged too far from its economic policy and the limited extent to which such policy would actually be carried out (Wallace & Wallace, 2000 p. 62).

The limited EU environmental policy that emerged during the 1970s was influenced by increased scientific evidence of environmental pollution and change, there were political and economic reasons for the attempts at forming policy. One factor was the slowing down of economic growth, which had previously been impressive during the 1950s and the 1960s; the EU Commission explored ways of stimulating economic growth in alternative ways. Another factor for considering the adoption of environmental policy

was provided by the Oil Crisis of 1973. The Oil Crisis was prompted by the United States support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War that resulted in the Arab oil producers cutting off oil supplies to the United States, the EU and Japan. The Oil Crisis led to significant price rises that provoked an international economic downturn (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 245). The effect of the Oil Crisis upon the EU environmental policy would prove to be short term and temporary. Member states reacted differently to the realisation of just how dependent their economic growth was on oil. The Netherlands and West Germany made limited efforts to improve fuel efficiency, France concentrated on maintaining good relations with the Arab States and only Britain at that point had its own oil supplies (*).

For the EU Commission the Oil Crisis of 1973 was ample demonstration of the need for more integrated economic and even environmental policy, rather than leaving individual member states to make their own decisions. Environmental policy was definitely secondary to economic policy and if economic policy was not sufficient, then environmental policy was arguably no policy at all (Bache & George, 2006 p. 10).

Concerns about pollution remained the main factors influencing the development and expansion of the EU's environmental policy. The EU Commission and the new Environment Directorate-General it established in 1981 sought to give EU environmental policy a higher public profile in the early 1980s. However, the impact of such publicity was negligible in comparison to the hard hitting recession prompted and worsened by the sharp rise in crude oil prices during 1979, which were a consequence of the Iranian Revolution (Jones et al, 2004, p. 695). The Environment Directorate-

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General attempted to increase the impetus of the EU's environmental policy by setting tougher targets to reduce air, water and land pollution, as well as seeking to amend the Common Agricultural Policy to decrease levels of soil erosion and use of chemicals. When the EU commission and the Environment Directorate-General sought to reduce the use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides to reduce the environmental damage caused by the intensive farming methods actively promoted by the Common Agricultural Policy. In the early 1980s the demands of the EU's environmental policy decision-makers to reduce the environmental impact of the Common Agricultural Policy were to a great extent ignored. Indeed the only demands to alter the Common Agricultural Policy that stood any realistic chance of being successful related to the EU considering the option of reducing the Common Agricultural Policy expenditure (Cini, 2003, p. 256). The impact and influence of the EU's environmental policy would start to increase from the middle of the 1980s. Although prior to that time its policy had been so limited when put into operation that it only made a minimal difference at best to reducing environmentally harmful practices within the EU. Observers of the EU's environmental policy could certainly had been forgiven that there was no policy in operation at all (Sawka & Stevens, 2000, p. 156). The ineffectiveness of the EU's earliest environmental policy was down to member states putting their economic interests first. It was due to the lack of coherent policy and strategy put forward by the Environment Directorate-General and the EU Commission, as well as the widespread belief that environmental issues were not that important (Wallace & Wallace, 2000 p. 30).

There are however, arguments that EU environmental is actually now a distinctive and increasingly important policy area within its own right. Environmental policy may have evolved as part of the EU economic policy, yet it is an over simplification to contend that it is not an environmental policy at all. The original structures of the EU meant that the primary focus of the community is economic, as full agreement could not be reached on other features of the EU. The governments of member states were mainly content to share power with the EU when it came to economic policy than other policy areas, such as defence and foreign policy. There was two alternative concepts of how the EU should operate as a Europe of Nations, or as supranational organisation that closely integrated all policy areas for its member states. The ineffectiveness of early attempts to establish an extensive environmental policy were not helped by the slow pace of integration until the mid 1980s, it is no coincidence that the effectiveness of the EU's environmental measures have increased whilst the EU has gained extra powers (Sawka & Stevens, 2000 p. 156).

Undoubtedly, the importance attributed to the pursuit of successful environmental policy within the EU was increased due to much stronger evidence of environmental damage which emerged during the 1980s especially in relation to the greenhouse effect (Eatwell & Wright, 2003, p. 234). Stronger scientific evidence had increased the media and the public awareness of the need for more effective and extensive environmental policy by both the EU and the governments of all member states. Taking measures to protect the environment transformed from being the preserve of environmentalist groups to an important issue for national governments and

the EU to consider. As the EU already had an environmental policy it just had to consider ways of making its policy more extensive in scope and more effective in operation than before (Jordan, 1999, p. 74). Therefore the EU Commission and the Environment Directorate-General had a strong case for expanding the scope of the EU's environmental policy. They could contend that environmental problems are on a global scale so that regional solutions would be of greater use in protecting the environment than the solutions put forward by the governments of the EU member states upon an individual basis. Of course, not all the member states of the EU had the same impact upon the environment. For instance, Britain, West Germany and France had a greater impact due to their larger populations and higher consumption levels. Some member states such as West Germany and the Netherlands had already begun measures to protect the environment earlier than the other EU member states (Bache & George, 2006 p. 10, Duff, 1997 p. 237).

The institutional changes of the EU which were a consequence of the Single European Act had a strong influence upon the EU being able to adopt tougher and more extensive measures within the scope of its environmental policy. Prior to the signing of the Single European Act, the governments of member states were able to veto any legislation or proposed EU policy within the framework of the Council of Ministers. The EU Commission had thus generally worked hard to achieve compromise over proposed legislation to avoid such proposals vetoed. Such a structure was blamed for slowing down the process of EU integration, as well as reducing the scope and the effectiveness of EU policy. The EU structure had been stretched by the enlargements of the 1970s and the 1980s, which had also slowed down the

deepening of the integration process. The primary objectives of the Single European Act were of course economic and political, although the move towards qualified majority voting on the Council of Ministers meant the EU found it easier to pass directives and legislation. That was due to legislation or directives were part of its environmental policy that no longer needed unanimous agreement to become adopted throughout the community. With the need to gain unanimous agreement over EU environmental policy within the Council of Ministers gone, it allowed the EU to put forward policy proposals more frequently and for those proposals to be carried forward more quickly with less chance of being watered down. The rationale behind the single market provided further justification of the EU to expand its environmental policy, so that all member states were implementing the same standards and aiming to achieve the same targets in reducing environmental damage through enhanced policy integration and co-operation (Bache & George, 2006, p. 253).

To argue that the EU environmental policy is no policy at all also ignores the efforts that the EU has made to limit and reduce the damage done to the environment by its member states. The notion of there not been an environment policy fails to mention its efforts to reach global agreements over the reduction of pollution and damage (). To its credit the EU Commission decided to act upon the evidence of the greenhouse effect, global warming and the shrinkage of the ozone layer. Action to stop the use of CFCs and thus stop the damage to the ozone layer, that was proven to be causing major levels of environmental damage. The agreement to phase out the use of CFCs was the first major worldwide accord to take action to

protect the environment. The EU would be a prime mover in instigating further worldwide agreements culminating in the Rio Earth Summit and the Kyoto Protocol. In political terms the Rio Earth Summit and the Kyoto Protocol were notable achievements, in the fact that environmental protection was recognised as a major problem for the planet's future. The agreements reached at the Rio Earth Summit and the Kyoto Protocol were criticised in some quarters for not going far enough to protect the environment, yet they are necessary steps in countering the greenhouse effect (Wallace & Wallace, 2000 p. 293).

The EU had to readjust its environmental programmes to reflect the greater levels of pollution in the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe before they were allowed to join the EU. The only exception was the former East Germany, which because subject to all EU legislation and programmes as soon as it reunited with West Germany in 1990. In the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe programmes in how to improve the environment were introduced at the same time as economic and political reforms to make these states liberal democracies that would eventually be ready to join the EU (Sawka & Stevens, 2000 p. 176). The EU Commission realised that enlargement to include the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe would also have implications for its regional development funds and the Common Agricultural Policy, as well as for environment programmes. Enlargement makes it harder to reach agreements over budgets and programmes, whilst obviously those programmes that are adopted and implemented will have more of an impact upon the environment (Cini, 2003 p. 257). The enlargement of the EU has

complicated the policy making process meaning it can take longer to develop and implement programmes that will protect the environment (Bache & George, 2006 p. 30).

Therefore, the EU environment policy was derived from its economic policy. As the whole original rationale of the EU was to promote economic growth and prosperity within its member states it is hardly surprising that economic programmes dominated its policy-making processes. It certainly took a couple of decades before the EU Commission began to develop a separate environment policy and even longer to make those policies more than superficial or merely symbolic. The delay in forming an effective environment programme was due to the lack of evidence of the greenhouse effect or global warming which meant that the EU contented itself with putting general measures to reduce pollution. At that point stating that EU environment policy was no policy at all would have been completely justified. From the 1980s the scope of policy was increased due to concerns about the greenhouse effect and global warming. The capacity to pursue a more proactive environment programme was enhanced as a consequence of the Single European Act, which allowed environmental measures to be approved by a qualified majority, rather than by a unanimous vote. The greater commitment of the EU to adopting more effective environment protection programmes and agreed targets at the Rio Earth Summit and the Kyoto Protocol. However, despite efforts to make the environment a more prominent issue the EU is still primarily an organisation that has economic agendas that are the most important of its policy objectives and remits.

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