

Environmental politics essay sample



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(a) The extract explains that “ the environment began to move up the political agenda in the latter part of the 1980’s” and that this is due to a combination of factors. Thatcher’s government paid little attention to environmental issues until it was forced to when events such as the nuclear power accident at Chernobyl in 1986 occurred rousing public interest and meaning that the government had to be seen to care about the environment even if it conflicted with its neo-liberal ideas. International initiatives were also being put into place meaning that the government was under further pressure to take similar steps. The extract describes how the environment became a key issue not because the Conservative party suddenly became concerned but because it was forced to take an interest by international institutions and as public concern grew about issues such as global warming.

(b) Although both the Labour and Conservative party are based on different ideologies both parties have found it difficult to promote environmental policies with enthusiasm, not only does this reflect how Labour’s political standpoint has changed but it also helps determine what the different parties priorities are. Pushing through bills that seriously protect the environment and allow it to flourish, in a lot of cases, cost a lot of money and may prevent economic growth; this is the underlying reason that both parties find it difficult to put the environment as their first priority.

Although both parties appear not to promote environmental policies with enthusiasm they do so for different reasons. The Conservative Party has traditionally backed a non-interfering government because its members believe that small government gives people greater freedom and that this will lead to the greatest number of people enjoying prosperity. In particular

the Conservative party is known for its lack of restriction on the economy meaning that taxes are supposed to be kept low and businesses allowed to flourish.

When backing environmental issues this comes into conflict with their free-market economy on many points, for example moves to reduce pollution by factories would mean that in a lot of cases factories would have even greater difficulty in making a profit and this goes against conservative principles of a free economy and reduced state intervention and, it can be argued, an individuals right to do as he wishes so long as it does not cause direct harm to others.

The Labour party has difficulty promoting environmental policies for different ideological reasons. The Labour party was created when there was mass unemployment and workers were tired of having no real power, an underlying principle of the Labour party has always been that employment is fundamental and that anybody who wants a job should be able to find one. This has always been central to the Labour party and unfortunately in many situations forcing the protection of the environment would mean cutting jobs, for example species of fish are still caught even though they are endangered because the government is aware that by banning certain types of fish there would be job losses.

Although employment is still fundamental to the Labour Party it can also be argued that the Labour Party has become more neo-liberal, particularly on economic issues and this means that, like the Conservative party, Labour wants to create a stable and growing economy and a lot of environmental

policies could be seen as jeopardising this. Both of the parties have to make a balance between economic stability and the health of the environment, because environmental problems do not seem so immediate the economy is a higher priority for both of the parties. Both parties are now supported by financial backers who the parties have to be wary of, many of these backers have large companies and would not appreciate having environmental bills forced upon them.

Both parties have chosen not to focus on the environment in the forthcoming election and this reflects public attitude. Although most voters can see the advantages that environmental policies bring most voters are also considered “light-green” this implies that they are happy to help the environment but as long as doing so does not damage their own wealth or time. A party that passionately puts forward ideas surrounding the environment may seem weak or incompetent on other issues such as the economy or self defence. A person is much more likely to vote for a party where they can see that if that party were to win power they would make changes that would effect the individual; this is why both parties will structure their campaigns around issues such as the NHS and education rather than the environment.

It can also be argued that for both parties environmental issues are out of their hands anyway. Institutions such as the EU and treaties such as the Kyoto agreement mean that the country is under constant pressure to improve its environmental status. Although the parties may not passionately support environmental policies when one is put before them they usually

accept unless it will have a huge impact, this is unlike in the US where the President refused to sign the Kyoto agreement.

(c) Most people would probably describe themselves as “green” yet it is possible to distinguish people further using the categories of “light green” and “dark green”. James Lovelock put forward the idea that earth is a single, self-regulating organism and that any species which upset the earth’s harmony could be wiped out; “dark green” thinkers tend to believe that humans should interfere with nature as little as possible and that all species have just as many rights as humans. Most people fit into the “light green” category which has more moderate ideas and does not demand huge social and political changes, “light green” thinkers agree that there are problems with the environment but that the way to solve them is through pragmatic and small changes. “Light greens” see humans as the centre of earth where as “dark greens” believe that earth would be just as valuable without humans.

“Dark green” thinking is often viewed as extreme and this is why “modern governments are more likely to accept ‘light green’ than ‘dark green’ thinking on environmental issues”. Governments accept “light green” thinking because it is more useful to them than “dark green” thinking, “dark green” ideas would mean completely changing the way Britain works where as “light green” ideas involve small changes; a good example of this is the congestion charging that now happens in London and can be seen as a “light green” idea, if a government were to take “dark green” thinking seriously cars would have to be banned altogether. “Dark green” thinking is

impractical and would make governments unpopular because it would be likely to cause an unstable economy and a removal of luxuries.

The Green Party is the biggest party most closely aligned to “dark green” ideas and although the number of MPs it has in the House of Commons remains small it does have an increasing number of MEPs and this reflects how a lot of the public are “light green”; they are happy to vote for a green when they will not feel the direct influence but would rather vote for an MP from a stronger party. The main parties, the Conservatives and Labour, do not have strong environmental backgrounds and therefore do not see it as much of a priority as for example the economy, as long as these parties continue to be voted into power government policy will remain “light green”. It can also be argued that green ideologies are unlikely to become popular because they are based on scientific facts unlike the other party’s ideologies which are based on morals and people may find these ideologies easier to relate to. The green ideology also downplays the role of humans on earth and people may find this unappealing.

Despite the fact that it seems unlikely that either of the two main parties would ever accept “dark green” ideas there are other reasons as to why “dark green” thinking may never be accepted by the majority. There is evidence that in the late 50’s and early 70’s and 90’s when the economy was at the top of its business cycle that activity by environmentalists also peaked. This suggests that people are only interested in environmentalism when they feel rich or secure enough to lose out a bit, John Kingdom wrote that affluence “gives leisured classes the luxury of self-criticism”, this

suggests that environmentalism will never be taken seriously if it is not even strong enough to withstand economic slumps.

There are also many, such as Michael Crichton, who argue that the ideas of “dark greens” should not be taken seriously because environmentalists are “doom merchants”. This suggests that concepts such as global warming may not be happening and if they do not pose a real threat and therefore governments should be concentrating on matters closer to home such as health and education rather than the state of the environment. Although none of the main parties would agree to having this view it does seem that they have not put the environment as a priority, the Blair government has repeatedly failed to meet its targets of pollution reduction and although there have been some small bills passed through on the whole the Government seems to be extremely far from a “dark green” way of thinking.

Although the link between fox-hunting and the environment is not solid, the debate surrounding fox-hunting did raise the question of whether or not animals have rights. The ban on fox-hunting caused uproar in the countryside, the government was seen as interfering and hunters have vowed to disobey the law and continue hunting anyway – this implies that if “dark green” ideas were to be implemented they would probably not be accepted by the public anyway or would need an extremely authoritarian government to enforce them. “Dark green” ideas will not work with just one country’s involvement and require countries to combine forces and work together this simply does not seem possible at the moment and is partly responsible as to why “modern governments are more likely to accept ‘light green’ than ‘dark green’ ideas”.