

# **GREEN** | Reconciling the local and the global **EUROPE**

**Natan Doron**

**FABIAN  
SOCIETY**

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Through a wide range of publications and events the society influences political and public thinking, but also provides a space for broad and open-minded debate, drawing on an unrivalled external network and its own expert research and analysis. Its programme offers a unique breadth, encompassing national conferences and expert seminars; periodicals, books, reports and digital communications; and commissioned and in-house research and comment.

The Society is alone among think tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation, with almost 7,000 members. Over time our membership has included many of the key thinkers on the British left and every Labour Prime Minister. Today we count over 200 parliamentarians in our number. The voluntary society includes 70 local societies, the Fabian Women's Network and the Young Fabians, which is itself the leading organisation on the left for young people to debate and influence political ideas.

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## About the author

Natan Doron joined the Fabian Society in September 2010 where he leads the Fabian Society Environment & Citizenship Programme. He co-authored the report 'Climate change and sustainable consumption: what do the public think is fair?' (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011). Prior to working at the Fabian Society, Natan worked in the Greenpeace China office in Beijing where he contributed to a number of campaigns including the Road to Copenhagen public engagement programme.

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As always the views and in particular any errors in the report errors are those of the author only.

## Summary

- Many environmental problems need international solutions. The debate over the role and nature of the EU should not obscure this fundamental reality
- But our European institutions are remote and bureaucratic; and the language of disaster adaptation, climate mitigation and ecosystem services excludes large numbers of people from the conversation about our environment. It is not enough to believe that Europe and the environment will have a powerful impact on everyone's lives. One has to be able to convince others of this
- How then can Europe and the environment be made more urgent in the minds of the public? How can political space be expanded for a debate on the future of both Europe and our environment that is constructive and helpful both for people today and for future generations?
- This report argues that governments and environmental campaigners have to spend more time thinking through how communities hear about and experience environmental and European policy at a very local level
- Those urging international action on the environment also have to explain the arguments in favour of policy in terms of their benefits for the economy
- There will always be a need for an internationalist ethic in environmentalism. But to win support for this politicians and campaigners must find new and engaging ways to talk about it. Those that believe in a future characterised by co-operation and collective action have to invest far more energy and commitment in explaining to others where that belief stems from

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Public opinion polls in Britain in recent years have been consistent in telling the same story: the most important things facing the country are the economy, immigration and asylum, welfare benefits and health. Europe has remained towards the bottom of voters' priority lists, and when they do think about it they tend to do so negatively. The environment barely gets a look in.<sup>i</sup>

The futures of the environment and Europe are closely intertwined. It is impossible to imagine the UK delivering on its ambitious carbon reduction targets without European agreement; little else has the potential to create more jobs than the continent-wide transition to a low-carbon economy. At the same time, with the political case for Europe feeling increasingly moribund and economic crisis fuelling ever greater Euroscepticism, it is through issues such as climate change that a new practical pro-Europeanism could be constructed. Indeed Fabian polling has shown the public understands that many of the major political challenges of the day – climate change, financial reform, fighting terrorism – can only be solved through closer European co-operation.

But both Europe and the environment have been cursed by a dense technocracy, in approach and in language, that has made it hard for people to connect with them as causes to fight for. Our European institutions are remote and bureaucratic; the language of disaster adaptation, climate mitigation and ecosystem services excludes large numbers of people from the conversation. It is not enough to believe that Europe and the environment will have a powerful impact on everyone's lives. One has to be able to convince others of this. The words we use and the way we campaign and practise politics matter.

How then can Europe and the environment be made more urgent in the minds of the public? How can political space be expanded for a debate on the future of both Europe and our environment that is constructive and helpful both for people today and for future generations?

This report offers some answers to these questions and is, above all, a reflection on the way that people argue and organise in favour of both greater European co-operation on international environmental challenges and environmental activism. The report argues explicitly from a British perspective. Some aspects of our debate about Europe and the environment may resonate with people in other European countries while others will not. It is hoped these similarities and differences may in some small way contribute to the way environmentalists across Europe think about their own approaches to the issues discussed.

The report draws upon previous work undertaken by the Fabian Society on both how to cultivate a more popular environmentalism as well as how

to better relate Europe to people's everyday lives to argue for a reimagined politics of Europe and the environment.

Europe on the eve of the 2014 elections is at a crossroads. The financial crisis and economic stagnation that has followed has caused national politics in individual member states to increasingly look inwards. Those that believe in a future characterised by co-operation and collective action have to invest far more energy and commitment in explaining to others where that belief stems from. The fear which leads to isolationism will only be countered by the hope of a better common future for Europe.

# 2 GREEN EUROPE

## A popular environmentalism

From a peak of political awareness in the mid-to-late 2000s, environmentalism has been allowed to slip off the agenda in the austere times that followed the financial crisis of 2008. David Cameron attempted to rebrand the Conservative party as a party of environmentalists with a 'vote blue go green' slogan. But in government the chancellor George Osborne has been an outspoken critic of the green agenda, criticising the impact of environmental regulation on the economy. The Labour party is increasingly focussing on the cost of living to the exclusion of the environment, while the Liberal Democrats have given ground on protection for the natural environment while in government. How did the green agenda move from political territory that was fought over by all three major parties to now being dismissed by mainstream politicians as a luxury policy concern?

One important reason can be found by looking at the political culture in the UK. In the last few years a strong critique has developed of the way in which politics has become increasingly centralised and managerial. With a target-driven culture in which change is mandated from Whitehall and delivered to and not with communities, politics has often seemed overly technocratic and remote from people's everyday experiences. This has been alienating to the people that politics seeks to represent.

A similar charge can be levelled at an environmentalism that has been overly focused on elite level engagement and legalistic policy solutions which fail to take root in real life. The practice of measuring ecosystem services and talk of natural capital has all taken place on the terrain of a top-down, managerial political culture. Importantly, this culture has affected not only environmental policy but also the practice of environmental NGOs and campaigning groups.

But despite these trends, pro-environmental sentiment provided one of the highest profile political news stories of this parliament. The coalition's botched attempt to negotiate the sell-off of forests revealed a deep source of emotional attachment not only to the nature of land use, accessibility and ownership. This episode has opened up another avenue from which to approach the idea of a popular environmentalism in the UK: that people have a resonant bond with the places they live and wish the environment they see around them to be conserved.

The Fabian Society is currently undertaking work to understand how a more popular environmentalism can be developed both in policy design and in campaigning practice.<sup>ii</sup> The research represents a challenge to environmental policy and campaigns that have been overly centrally-focused and distant



in recent years. Policies for ecosystem services and biodiversity offsetting mean little to most people. Posters of polar bears or stories about international carbon trading most likely mean even less.

But environmental policy and campaigns have a range of rich potential hooks on which to hang popular ideas. The protection or even creation of local woods for people to walk in and children to play in. The insulation of homes to make them warmer in winter. But the language of environmentalism often eschews talking about place and instead uses the language of ecosystems or climate mitigation.

Environmentalism cannot abandon technocracy. Expertise is important and the management of the natural environment is complicated. But the need to build and retain public support is also necessary for maintaining political will in a democracy and it requires its own type of expertise and careful consideration. As a consequence governments and environmental campaigners have to spend more time thinking through how communities hear about and experience environmental policy at a very local level.

Environmental policy may be made at the town hall, in Whitehall, in Brussels or thrashed out in a conference centre in a distant capital city. But the impacts of environmental policy are largely experienced by us in the places in which we live. Policy makers and environmental campaigners need to organise at the grassroots level and illustrate the benefits of environmental policies for particular places.

## Next generation Europe

Just as the environment has suffered from being overly technocratic and distant, the European Union has come to represent a politics that is very hard for people to engage with. European parliamentary elections in the UK have never seen more than 38 per cent turnout. A recent research report by the Electoral Commission showed that a significant number of people didn't even know the UK was part of the European Union.<sup>iii</sup>

This low level of public engagement is in stark contrast to politicians in Westminster who debate Europe in detail. Indeed, the issue of Europe has torn the Conservative party apart in the UK for many years. A period of disquiet from the Conservative backbenchers has forced David Cameron to promise them an 'in-out' referendum in 2017 should they win the next election. The Labour party are somewhat divided on how to respond and may end up supporting a referendum they don't really want.

Europe is so important in Westminster politics that it is redrawing the boundaries of traditional party politics. Anti-European Union sentiment among certain parts of the Conservative party in the early 1990s led to the establishment of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) who are now challenging the Liberal Democrats for the position of the Britain's third political party.

But while Europe is a pressing concern for politicians in Westminster, the public are far less preoccupied with it. Though some members of the public may feel anger towards Europe, the majority give it little consideration. It is a textbook policy area reserved for elite discussion: political obsession coupled with low levels of public engagement.

Europe is most commonly represented in parts of the British media as a continent marred by economic catastrophe and/or as a source of large scale immigration. It is of little surprise then that popular sentiment on Europe

usually ranges from apathy to hostility. In the face of this, the pro-European lobby have struggled to make a coherent case.

The Fabian Society has examined the question of how pro-Europeans can begin to set out their stall with greater success in future.<sup>iv</sup> The 'Next Generation Europe' project began from the premise that some people in Europe are too young to remember the fall of the Berlin wall while many more were not born when European integration brought peace in a continent that was so recently at war.

Next Generation Europe was based on original research that looked for a new story to replace the old arguments for Europe which have lost their resonance. The work found that practical and immediate concerns provided a platform on which to tell a more positive story about the EU. Freedom to travel, work and live in other EU countries mattered to people. And arguments about common standards of worker's rights as well as co-operation in tackling global issues such as climate change were more resonant than arguments about keeping peace after the Second World War.

For younger generations, the fight against climate change is a closer temporal concern than the need for peace that led to the founding of Europe – and this must form the basis of a reinvigorated case for an internationalist environmentalism.

## Green Europe

There will always be a need for an internationalist ethic in environmentalism. This is how Europe matters so much to environmentalism both in Britain and in the world.

Many environmental issues as well as corporations are trans-boundary in nature. Pollution and many types of birds and animals move across borders. Climate change is a problem global in scale. As a result action must often be taken at an international level.

In many cases international action will be more effective in dealing with environmental problems. Attempts to stimulate the growth of renewable energy in Europe were vastly accelerated when binding directives requiring their expansion came into place.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, the cross-continental protection of particular species has had huge and demonstrable effects on the conservation of many familiar birds.<sup>vi</sup>

Renewable energy and the protection of birds are just two examples of where Europe has been good for addressing challenges that require long term approaches and binding agreements. Another example is the restrictions imposed on new cars, which have saved people hundreds of pounds as the cost of running a car has come down with increasing fuel efficiency standards.<sup>vii</sup>

Europe has a far from perfect record on environmental policy. For example the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been responsible for the expansion of the use of fertilisers and pesticides on a massive scale which have damaged species and natural habitats all over the continent.

But Europe represents the appropriate scale for engaging in mutual international action in order for the UK to address many environmental problems. European action can insulate the UK against being undercut by neighbouring countries abandoning environmental regulation. Often it creates economies of scale which maximise opportunities for private investment – for example

if Europe commits to ambitious energy efficiency standards then industry has assurance that demand will increase in a large market place.

The EU can have a transformative effect on people's lives – but people are often unlikely to accept this or feel that the EU is more likely to hinder the UK's progress than help it. Carefully constructed regulation made in Brussels can lead to new businesses delivering green goods and services starting up in Britain, but this on its own is not enough. Campaigners need to tell positive stories about the benefits that European co-operation has brought to their everyday lives. In this way, legislative action on the European level can be seen as empowering collective action rather than disempowering top-down technocracy. In order for people to feel it is worth making the personal sacrifices necessary to live more sustainably, they first need to bound into a framework that fosters a sense of environmental citizenship and imbues confidence that if they act, others will too. Grassroots and governments need to be working towards the same goal.

The future of environmentalism also has to be explained in terms of its benefits for the economy. This argument will take a number of forms. Some of it will be in the new jobs created by the low-carbon transition, from engineering jobs in renewable energy generation to insulation jobs in driving up energy efficiency. The move away from an over-reliance on fossil fuels will also bring down the costs of energy for both households and businesses in future.

Beyond traditional measures of economic success, a continued prioritisation of environmentalism in Europe will also mean a richer natural environment for Europeans. This will mean greater access to green spaces which can play a big part in boosting mental and physical wellbeing. A report by Natural England calculated that the UK could save £2.1 billion in healthcare if every household in England were provided with good access to quality green space.<sup>viii</sup>

Green spaces are a good example of where European and local environmental frameworks can combine to make a positive difference. To protect a local wood does not require intervention from Brussels. But protecting a migratory bird in that wood does require strong international co-operation. The EU can do this. It can also ensure that the air people breathe is clean and that companies in neighbouring countries aren't polluting shared waterways.

So Europe and the environment need to be clearly linked and talked about in a way that relates to people's everyday lives and local surroundings. But a case also need to be constructed which demonstrates the contribution they will make to a positive vision for the economy - one which delivers better jobs, higher wages, high living standards and improved wellbeing for all. Greater international co-operation and the protection of our natural resources will be essential to the flourishing of future generations of Europeans.

And public opinion may already be susceptible to such arguments. Polling shows that environmental co-operation is one area where Europe makes sense to British voters. Only 25 per cent of people in a recent poll thought that Britain would have been better acting alone on climate change.<sup>ix</sup> A Eurobarometer survey in 2011 showed that across the EU 68 per cent of people thought that protection of the environment should be decided jointly within the European Union.<sup>x</sup> A compelling argument can be constructed by making a popular environmentalism the heart of a next generation case for Europe.

# 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The argument for both Europe and for the environment must be new, positive and relevant to people's lives and be drawn together – we should not succumb to the temptation of separating out the environment from Europe when building the case for each.

Although from some perspectives it may seem that it would be easier to make the case for each on its own merits, Europe and the environment could be the answer to the problem that both face in gaining public and political traction.

This has practical implications for a range of stakeholders including members of the European parliament (MEPs), campaigning groups seeking to make the case for international co-operation on environmental issues and businesses hoping to gain from a more robust approach to environmental policy in Europe. We set out some recommendations to these stakeholders below:

## Recommendations for MEPs

1. **Link environmental benefits to local places:** MEPs have to communicate to their voters when policy made in Brussels is having a positive impact on environmental standards. For example, if you've been involved with passing European law on protecting birdlife, fish stocks, creating green jobs or energy efficiency, then find examples in your constituency when possible where you can talk about the real impact that law has had.
2. **Link economic wins to your constituents:** the main stories voters hear from Europe are tales of debt and economic catastrophe. Find the positive examples and explain them in clear ways. Has European regulation created new jobs and markets? Has it brought down costs and eased the squeeze on living standards? MEPs have to put the time in to communicate these wins.
3. **Empower your constituents:** Europe can seem abstract and distant. MEPs should hold public meetings with constituents explaining how European policy is made, how it effects them and seeking views on what should be done. These meetings can be forums through which the first two recommendations can be pursued face to face with constituents. MEPs should also seek to work with young people, including in schools – our research has shown that younger generations are more pro-European and it is they who will be the next generation facing environmental problems on a global scale.

## Recommendations for campaigning groups

1. **Grassroots organising:** by adopting grassroots community organising techniques and combining them with a language and practice of popular environmentalism, campaigning groups can create groups of people who devote time to convincing others in their local area of the benefits accrued to them through European environmental legislation. A 'made-by-Europe' campaign day could use social media to share information on areas of natural wealth or species protected by European legislation.
2. **Language:** the language of environmental campaigns must be tailored to help a much wider group of people see the benefits for them. For example instead of talking about 'food security' campaigning groups should talk about affordable, healthy food available for everyone both now and far into the future.
3. **Living standards:** across Europe now there is an unprecedented squeeze on living standards and high unemployment. European environmentalism has to be shown to be essential to addressing this crisis through green growth and jobs on the one hand and the stability of utility bills through responsible resource management on the other. Green Europe has to represent jobs and stable prices as well as a rich natural environment.

## Recommendations for businesses

1. **Take positions:** businesses that have benefitted from European co-operation and environmental ambition have been too guilty of leaving politicians to make the case for green Europe. If more businesses can build coalitions of support with civil society campaigning groups then political space can be expanded to argue for green Europe.
2. **Trumpet the benefits when they've helped:** if renewable energy job creation is booming thanks to European directives then business needs to make this case more clearly. Repeating such messages across parts of the private sector will help to counter those who characterise Europe as a source of endless 'red tape' and a drag on growth. European regulation will not always be helpful for all businesses but currently the anti-regulation lobby is far more vocal in its criticism than any beneficiaries are in their praise.
3. **Invest in the local spaces where you are based:** just as environmentalism and Europe has to reconnect to local spaces in order for people to understand the benefits, businesses must do more to invest in the places they are located. This ranges from enhancing local green spaces to creating apprenticeships in those spaces. Such acts will create opportunities for business to engage communities in a conversation about green Europe.

Politicians at the local and national level also need to find new and engaging ways to talk about environmentalism and the role of Europe, both in the short and long term. Imminently the European elections in May 2014 mean it is essential that green advocates across the political spectrum make a strong

case for greater co-operation and ambition on environmental issues. As some politicians in Europe turn against the environmental agenda there is a responsibility for green advocates to keep making the arguments in favour of a greener Europe. In the longer-term there are massive gains to be had from a more integrated approach to environmental policy in Europe. It has been estimated that greater integration of gas and electricity markets in Europe could save EU member states up to €40bn in total by 2030.<sup>xi</sup> Such gains will only be available to Europeans if the case is made for greater cooperation in the future.

# 4 CONCLUSION

The next few years will be definitive for the story of European environmentalism. Ahead of us lie the international climate change negotiations in Paris 2015. This will be the biggest opportunity for Europe to make an impact on agreeing a binding global deal to reduce international carbon emissions since Copenhagen in 2009.

For Europe to have a strong bargaining position in these negotiations it must demonstrate that ambition on the continent has not faltered. The 2030 targets being agreed in the European parliament in early 2014 will determine how ambitious Europe can claim to be when Paris 2015 comes around.

All the EU countries have committed to halting the loss of the diversity of wildlife across the continent by 2020. Investment and political commitment at all levels is needed to make good on that pledge.

But such things will in part be determined by the available amount of political will. Political will in Europe is inescapably linked to public opinion. The driving goal for some campaigners will be to visualise the world in 2050 with a binding international commitment to reduce emissions and an expanded stock of natural wealth. But this vision must be painted in primary colours and the initial steps along the pathway to making this vision reality must themselves be as compelling as the desired destination.

The financial crisis and growing insecurity across Europe provide the reality to which a popular and relevant European environmentalism can be offered in response to. Our houses will be warmer in winter, our cities cooler in summer. Communities will be safer from storms, while our food will be healthier and cheaper. Our economies will be stronger as we sometimes compete with and at other times co-operate with our European neighbours to be less dependent on fossil fuels.

In a recent book on the future of Europe, Anthony Giddens argues that Europe before the crash had delivered greater economic prosperity than otherwise would have existed.<sup>xii</sup> We have seen that the story of practical success offered by Europe will be a key part of a more relevant and popular European environmentalism.

But in thinking through the relationship between political and public opinion it is an older text by Giddens that is perhaps more helpful. In 2009's *The Politics of Climate Change*, Giddens describes the paradox by which the point when climate change seems real and urgent is also the point at which it is too late to do anything meaningful to stop it. This cannot be the story of European environmentalism.

Europe and the environment may not top the list of people's concerns but by bringing them together, by explaining how international co-operation in some critical environmental areas can allow European countries to be more than the sum of their parts, we can start outlining a European environmentalism that is vital to the way people think about their futures.



# ENDNOTES

- i Only 13 per cent chose Europe as one of three options for the most important issues facing Britain in a recent poll. The environment fared worse failing even to register double figures as only 7% chose it as one of three options. The rank of most important issues facing Britain at the moment taken from YouGov data which can be accessed at: [http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/gffttqv3109/YG-Archives-Pol-Trackers-Issues%282%29-081113.pdf](http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/gffttqv3109/YG-Archives-Pol-Trackers-Issues%282%29-081113.pdf)
- ii The Fabian Society research on a more popular environmentalism cited in this report was carried out by Natan Doron and Ed Wallis. A report on this work will be available in 2014 as part of the Fabian Society's ongoing Environment & Citizenship programme output
- iii The research was based on a series of deliberative focus groups and can be accessed here: [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/163283/GfK-NOP\\_EU20Referendum20Question20Testing20Research20Report-WEB.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/163283/GfK-NOP_EU20Referendum20Question20Testing20Research20Report-WEB.pdf)
- iv The Fabian Society report 'Next Generation Europe' edited by Ed Wallis can be read here: <http://www.fabians.org.uk/publications/next-generation-europe/>
- v. For more information on the role that EU directives played in kick-starting the growth of electricity generated by renewable sources see the Green Alliance report by Rachel Cary and Friederike Metternich 'What has EU climate and energy policy done for the UK?' [http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/grea\\_p.aspx?id=7305](http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/grea_p.aspx?id=7305)
- vi <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/317/5839/810>.short for more information
- vii Cary and Metternich, *op. cit.* [http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/grea\\_p.aspx?id=7305](http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/grea_p.aspx?id=7305)
- viii Our Natural Health Service: the role of the natural environment in maintaining healthy lives, Natural England, 2009
- ix See the full polling from Next Generation Europe project here: <http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Next-Generation-Europe.pdf>
- x Data taken from fieldwork conducted by Eurobarometer in November 2011. The data is available to download from [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)
- xi This figure is taken from the July 2013 report 'Benefits of an integrated European energy market' prepared by Booz & Company [http://ec.europa.eu/energy/infrastructure/studies/doc/20130902\\_energy\\_integration\\_benefits.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/energy/infrastructure/studies/doc/20130902_energy_integration_benefits.pdf)
- xii Giddens, Anthony, Turbulent and Mighty Continent: What Future for Europe? <http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0745680968.html>



## About the Fabian Society Environment and Citizenship programme

Environmental challenges involve huge issues of justice and fairness. Many actions to avert dangerous climate change or other forms of environmental harm impose burdens on individuals, from constraints on consumption to financial costs. The effects of environmental change bear unevenly too. How these burdens and impacts are to be shared fairly is a crucial question for public policy.

This programme looks at environmental policy challenges and the role of citizenship: both democratic consent and personal behavioural change. It considers the interaction between environmental issues, fairness and social justice and how public support can be built for sustainability measures affecting personal consumption.

# **GREEN EUROPE |**

## **RECONCILING THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL**

Natan Doron

Europe on the eve of the 2014 elections is at a crossroads. The financial crisis and economic stagnation that has followed has caused national politics in individual member states to increasingly look inwards.

As Europe questions its own commitment to international action across a range of environmental areas, other countries including the emerging economies of Brazil, India and China are to different extents developing ambitious environmental policy frameworks of their own. To avoid losing its status as a leader in environmental policy on the international stage, democratic consent needs to be secured for a more popular environmentalism throughout Europe.

This report explores ways in which political space to debate the future of both Europe and the environment can be expanded and become more constructive and helpful both for people today and for future generations.

The report is part of the Fabian Society's Environment & Citizenship programme. The programme considers the interaction between environmental issues, fairness and social justice and the role of citizenship in fostering a more popular environmentalism.