

# Tentative feelers: The Liberal Party's response to the emergence of the Green Party

**T**HIS ARTICLE EXAMINES the Liberal Party's attempts to respond to the rise of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s and particularly one aspect of this: the creation of the Green Party. This includes Jeremy Thorpe's attempt to join the latter during the 1979 general election campaign and the early dialogue between the two parties about electoral arrangements. It argues that it was impossible for the Liberal Party to fully embrace the ideas put forward by radical environmentalists and the Green Party, and that discussions about pacts were largely doomed from the start. The article is based on original historical research examining documents in public and private archives relating to both parties from the 1970s and early 1980s as well as interviews carried out by the author with relevant individuals.

### The Green Party

The UK currently has three green parties, as the Scottish Greens and the Green Party in Northern Ireland are separate from the Green Party of England and Wales. The greens in the UK began life as PEOPLE, in 1973, formed out of almost nothing in Coventry by two solicitors, Tony and Lesley Whittaker, and two estate agents, Michael Benfield and Freda Sanders.<sup>1</sup> This was Europe's first green party, though in the coming years many others emerged so that during the 1980s they became a standard feature of Western European party systems. PEOPLE stood candidates in the 1974 elections but struggled to get off the ground and in 1975 it changed its name to the Ecology Party.

Nonetheless a party committed to fundamental reorganisation of society and the economy based on the prioritisation of environmental concerns was a feature of British politics from this time onwards. At the 1979 general election, the Ecology Party stretched itself in order to break the fifty-candidate threshold, drawn from a membership of hundreds, to qualify for an election broadcast.<sup>2</sup> This was not exactly a springboard to electoral success (it would still be two decades

before a stand-alone green candidate was voted in to any office higher than local councillor) but it was the first step out of obscurity and towards national relevance.

### The Liberal Party and the environment

The creation of PEOPLE was part of a wider awakening of environmental concern both internationally and domestically during the 1960s and 1970s. This period saw unprecedented growth in the size and number of environmental pressure groups in the UK.<sup>3</sup> The established political parties were not immune to this development and environmental groups were set up in Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberals during the 1970s.

In the 1970s the Liberal Party certainly made attempts to accommodate the new political environmentalism. They debated environmental issues at their assembly as early as 1971 and passed a symbolic resolution at their 1974 assembly placing economic growth in the context of ecological constraints.<sup>4</sup> The 1979 booklet *Your Future with the Liberals* included assembly resolutions on the environment, transport and energy from the late 1970s, and in 1979 the assembly passed a resolution declaring that 'economic growth, as measured by GDP, is neither desirable nor achievable'.<sup>5</sup>

The 1970 election manifesto contained almost nothing on the environment barring a brief reference to 'the dangers of pollution and the damage we have done to the environment.' The party's February 1974 manifesto contained sections on quality of life, the energy crisis, 'the environment' and transport, though these were omitted in October.<sup>6</sup> A comparison of British parties' manifestos from 1959 onwards showed that at the 1979 general election the Liberal Party devoted considerably more attention to environmental issues, as a percentage of the overall document, than any of the three main parties had ever done.<sup>7</sup> The Liberal Ecology Group (LEG) was also formed in 1977.<sup>8</sup>

Some senior party figures were involved in environmental campaigning during this period, for example Lord Beaumont (later to defect to the

Green Party) was a key early figure in the Green Alliance environmental pressure group. David Steel is quoted in a LEG manifesto as arguing in 1979 that:

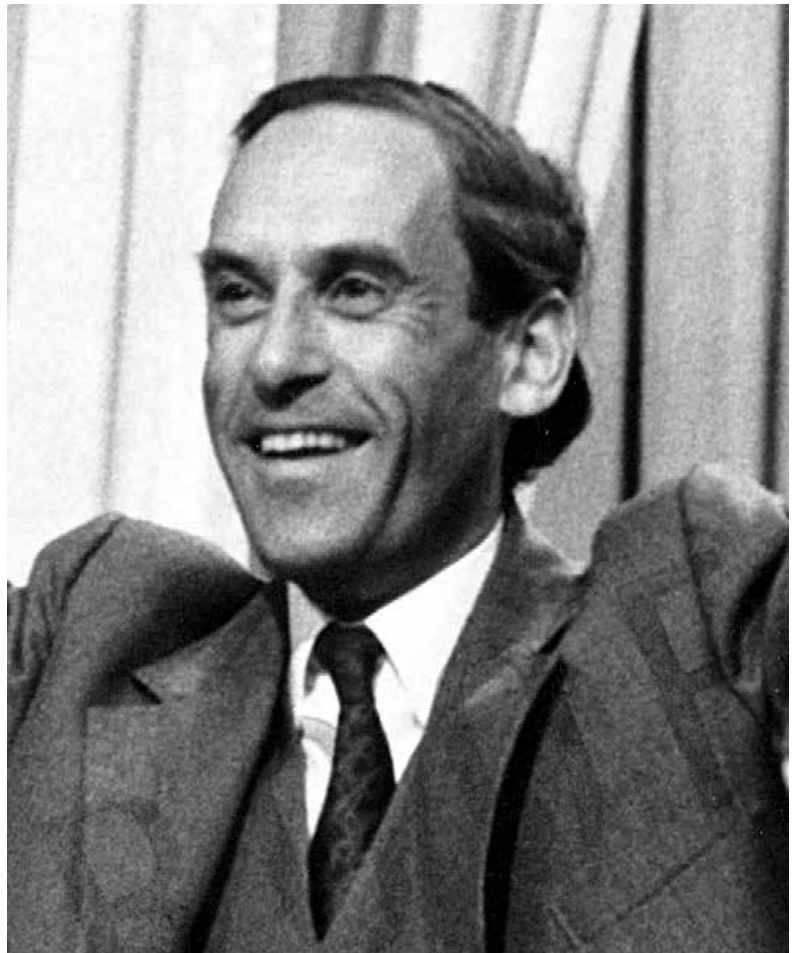
We need to get our economy more into balance and take a more sensible, long-term view of energy and resources. Our grandchildren will not forgive us easily if we leave them a cold and silent world, because we were too short-sighted to look ahead.<sup>9</sup>

There were limits to this early greening of the Liberal Party however and some of the environmental resolutions and statements created significant opposition within the party. The PEOPLE National Executive Committee (NEC) observed that the Liberal assembly motion in 1974 had been in favour of 'controlled economic growth' and attempts to make this about zero growth had failed.<sup>10</sup> Steel was challenged by the Ecology Party's first councillor on a radio phone-in show in 1976 over whether he supported continued economic growth. At first, he struggled to understand the question but finally came down in favour of 'the right kind of economic growth'.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the Liberal leadership campaigned mainly on issues other than the environment during the 1970s, and in 1985 a LEG manifesto conceded that 'the extent to which the Party's policy is based on ecological principles is still limited'.<sup>12</sup>

### The Liberal Party and the Green Party

The Liberal Party's engagement with environmental politics was of considerable interest to early members of what became the Green Party. Internal PEOPLE/Ecology Party documents from the 1970s, such as their newsletters, feature numerous discussions of Liberal Party activity on the environment, including occasional eyewitness accounts of Liberal meetings such as the 1978 LEG AGM.<sup>13</sup> These deliberations generally focused on how seriously the Liberal Party could be taken on the environment. PEOPLE/Ecology Party activists also pushed Liberals to go further on the environment, writing letters to figures such as Lord Avebury and John Pardoe, seeking to attract the Young Liberals and even picketing the 1978 Liberal Party assembly.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the 1970s there were lots of examples of ad hoc conversations between different people involved with the two parties. An early member of PEOPLE's NEC reported a long but inconclusive discussion in his local area (Leeds) with a Young Liberal who was a 'no-growth' in 1974.<sup>15</sup> In 1977 there was a joint Liberal and Ecology Party local election candidate in Leeds.<sup>16</sup> A meeting was held in July 1977 between representatives of the ecological groups within the three main parties and the Ecology Party – what may well have been the first dedicated all-party meeting on the environment ever in the UK. This was



reported in the environmental magazine *Good Earth* to have highlighted 'the gulf' that seemed to separate the Ecology Party from the others. For the Ecology Party 'all other considerations were subordinate' to the environment.<sup>17</sup> The aforementioned Lord Beaumont is listed as an attendee at the Ecology Party's conference in 1978.<sup>18</sup> Paddy Ashdown attended an Ecology Party meeting in the South West prior to standing in Yeovil in the 1979 general election and was noted by an Ecology Party activist as having 'continually uttered sentiments that made one wonder why he was a member of the Liberal Party at all'.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing of these flirtations between the parties is Jeremy Thorpe's application to join the Ecology Party. Following his resignation as leader and while awaiting trial Thorpe was selected by the North Devon Liberal Party as their candidate to fight the 1979 general election.<sup>20</sup> During this campaign he approached Tony Whittaker, PEOPLE co-founder and the local Ecology Party candidate, to ask if he could join them. Whittaker later stated 'you can imagine the surprise with which I... received his application form and cheque'.<sup>21</sup> The attempt to join the Ecology Party was reported in the press at the time and Thorpe's election agent Lilian Prowse dismissed it as 'all a bit of a joke'.<sup>22</sup> However, Thorpe's letter, which states that 'I am delighted to join the Ecology Party as a standard member', seems entirely earnest.<sup>23</sup>

Jeremy Thorpe, MP for North Devon 1959–79, Leader of the Liberal Party 1967–76

The initial contact had been between the two candidates, but Tony Whittaker passed the enquiry on to the main central organisers in the Ecology Party. They were said to be concerned that Thorpe was 'bad news'.<sup>24</sup> A reply was sent out from the party chairman stating that, although dual membership of the Ecology Party and another party was permitted, this did not extend to candidates of other parties and so they rejected the application.<sup>25</sup> Thorpe's somewhat sour reply, ending with 'my form was valid but more so your loss', again suggests he genuinely wanted to join the party.<sup>26</sup> He was also quoted in the press insisting that, despite the Ecology Party's public and private rejection of his application, 'as far as I am concerned, I have joined.' *The Guardian* observed at the time that 'the more cynical voters of North Devon may conclude that the whole thing was a gambit to stop Liberal votes going to the Ecology Party's sole and official candidate.'<sup>27</sup>

There was also contact between the leading national figures within both parties about more organised collaboration in the lead up to the 1979 general election. The Ecology Party Chairman's Report for 1977–78 noted that the Liberals' had 'put out tentative feelers' about local electoral arrangements with the Ecology Party.<sup>28</sup> The minutes of the Ecology Party's September 1978 NEC note that 'several members of the NEC reported on talks and letters with official Liberals – including the President of the Liberal Party'.<sup>29</sup> Michael Steed, president of the Liberal Party from 1978 to 1979 and a psephologist, confirmed this in interview, as he had noticed the respectable number of votes the two PEOPLE candidates in Coventry had achieved in February 1974 in seats without a Liberal candidate.<sup>30</sup> The discussions led to little in the way of concrete action but the Liberal Party shared a list of where 'green Liberals' were standing in 1979 and the Ecology Party updated them on where they were fielding candidates. There were at least two constituencies selected by the Ecology Party to deliberately avoid a clash with a Liberal candidate. During the 1979 general election campaign the Ecology Party chairman expressed his hope that the two parties could continue to work together on tactics in the future and dialogue continued between them into the early 1980s.<sup>31</sup>

### Discussion

During a PEOPLE meeting in 1974, activists discussed the idea of simply disbanding PEOPLE and joining the Liberals. This was rejected, partly on the grounds that, while the Young Liberals were demonstrating sufficient radicalism on the environment, the wider party was not and they would need Jeremy Thorpe (then leader) to depart in order for this to happen.<sup>32</sup> This raises the question of whether the Liberals could have prevented the emergence of a green party in Britain simply by going further on environmental matters at

an earlier stage. After all, some radical environmentalists felt their interests were best served in the Liberals. A Liberal councillor wrote to *The Ecologist* magazine in 1976 to explain that he was going to remain in the party because he believed it could be 'converted to a coherent no-growth philosophy'.<sup>33</sup>

There are some parallels here with an earlier and far more significant event in the Liberal Party's history: the creation of the Labour Party. It has been noted that the Liberal Party was slow to support working-class candidates in the late nineteenth century and that many of the early leading figures in the Labour Party had been denied Liberal Party nominations.<sup>34</sup> In this case, though, there are two reasons why it would not have been possible for the Liberals to prevent the development of a green party in Britain. Firstly, as a party with its own, pre-existing ideological approach, the Liberals could certainly embrace and incorporate environmental concerns, but they were always going to struggle to give the same degree of emphasis to them compared with a party created specifically to respond to a perceived ecological crisis. Secondly, for similar reasons there were limitations to how radical the Liberal Party offering on the environment could be, particularly while it wished to maintain widespread electoral appeal. As one Ecology Party activist explained in 1976, he had joined the Ecology Party because the other parties would simply not be able to 'to adopt such a radically different philosophical basis'.<sup>35</sup> The most obvious dividing line here is the issue of economic growth. Overt and total opposition to economic growth was a philosophical cornerstone of PEOPLE/the Ecology Party, but it is not conceivable for the Liberal Party to have unequivocally matched this position.

The early dialogue between the two parties also raises the question of whether deeper and more long-term electoral arrangements could have developed between the two parties. Occasional, ad hoc agreements have been reached in subsequent years – at the 2017 general election the attempt to create a 'progressive alliance' saw greens stand aside in thirteen seats to help Liberal Democrat candidates and the Liberal Democrats reciprocated in two seats – but this has been very limited in scope.<sup>36</sup> There are clues as to why deeper and more lasting collaboration never emerged in the early exchanges between the two parties. In an amicable letter to Liberal Party figures about attempts to avoid direct competition in seats sent in March 1979, the Ecology Party chairman references the blockages created by the 'deep suspicion' of his members and the need to respect local parties' autonomy.<sup>37</sup> In considering the idea of a meeting with the Ecology Party in 1980, Steed suggests in an internal note that the Liberals need to be careful 'since we have far more credibility to rub off on them than vice versa' and that the main motivation for meeting greens is to convince their members to join the

During the 1979 general election campaign the Ecology Party chairman expressed his hope that the two parties could continue to work together on tactics in the future and dialogue continued between them into the early 1980s.

Liberals.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately therefore the difficulties of overcoming partisan divides and finding a genuinely mutually beneficial arrangement between the two competing parties were evidenced from the beginning.

### Conclusion

Since the Green Party was formed, the Liberal Party (and the Liberal Democrats) have arguably been the party most consistently close to them on environmental issues. The two parties have also had something of a symbiotic relationship – it was partly the turmoil of the Liberal and SDP merger that allowed the greens to capitalise on rising environmental concern and achieve their breakthrough result of 15 per cent of the national vote share in the 1989 European election.<sup>39</sup> Despite their early discussions, it would have been very difficult for the Liberals to have either prevented the emergence of a green party in the UK or developed comprehensive electoral arrangements. The environmentalism which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was not easy for the established parties, including the Liberals, to embrace totally, as it broke from mere nature conservation and amounted to something much more holistic and radical. The general issues which tend to make pacts between all political parties difficult – including overcoming partisan divides, coordinating local parties' actions and finding lasting arrangements which will benefit both sides – have also hampered cooperation between liberals and greens.

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**In an amicable letter to Liberal Party figures about attempts to avoid direct competition in seats sent in March 1979, the Ecology Party chairman references the blockages created by the 'deep suspicion' of his members and the need to respect local parties' autonomy.**