



Putting the personal first?

There are many ways to be concerned about climate change and to become involved in the environment movement, but the stratagem of adopting a personal 'green' lifestyle, abetted by the government, has been the environment movement's success story so far. The message portrayed is that everybody must do their bit to protect the environment, whether this is through individuals recycling, minimising the use of plastic bags, cutting down on flying, changing eating habits (by buying local produce or going meat-free) or by becoming a member of local protest groups. And the message has really caught on. Without wishing to dismiss these activities however, the argument should be examined.

Because of the pervasiveness of the personal lifestyle and individual approach to 'being green', it may be useful to have a critical look at four related arguments:

1. "I am doing my bit and that is enough"
2. "We must all be green"
3. "It's the little things that get through to people"
4. "There are millions of us"

"I am doing my bit and that is enough"

This has been described as the Blue Peter approach (the principle being that one can save a glacier by recycling yoghurt pots). This idea is not one to dismiss completely - as David Mackay, chief scientific adviser to the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), says 'every little bit helps but only a little bit' - but by solely concentrating efforts on the little changes the discussion and development of larger strategic approaches can be blocked.

Empirical evidence in the WWF's Weathercocks and Signposts study demonstrates that the so-called stairway theory (that one step leads to another does not lead up the staircase, but precisely the opposite; it can lead to the blocking of the bigger discussion and development of more strategic approaches.

"We must all be green"

The green agenda is sometimes seemingly heavily promoted by national government, businesses, and local councils, but with the focus all too often is upon the individual: we are exhorted/encouraged to sort our rubbish, reuse shopping bags,, use unleaded petrol, etc. Many people have embraced this lifestyle, while others have been put off by the constant propaganda, seeing it as an assault on their individual freedom. The fundamental flaw in this stratagem is that it allows the impression that everyone is equally to blame for climate change and that everyone can play an equal role in controlling it. Putting the blame and responsibility onto individuals suits the government and businesses well, as it diverts attention away from the unsustainable, wasteful system we live in.

Emphasis upon the personal fosters a moralistic and competitive approach, and leaves the potential for 'carbon footprint guilt' to stop individuals from becoming active by coming to meetings and going on demonstrations, believing that their level of personal emissions will be under scrutiny and judgement by those who have found a way to live in a greener way.

"It's the little things that get through to people"

Local actions, focused for example around a supermarket, can sometimes increase general awareness, and can be a way of opening up connections and recruiting climate-change activists. As such, these local actions are valuable. But one danger is that the action becomes an end itself, remaining local and atomised; never forming part of a wider plan. We believe it is important not to lose sight of the bigger picture. Where there are specific campaigns there could be dedicated action groups within the Alliance, for example a group

campaigning for better cycling facilities against an incinerator proposal. These action groups can focus on specifics but so the actions can be carried forward within a more general, widely applicable strategy.

The following example from a previous political campaign might illustrate the point: Anti-apartheid campaigners who boycotted South African oranges at their local supermarket knew their boycott in itself would do very little to change the big picture. But one group, the shop workers at the Dunnes supermarket in Dublin, received backing from their union, and refused to handle South African fruit. This led to a strike in 1984 and, eventually, in 1987 the Irish Government imposed sanctions on the importing of South African fruit and produce.

"There are millions of us"

Paul Hawken, author of *Blessed Unrest - How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being*, suggests that

'there are over one - maybe even two - million organisations [worldwide] working towards ecological sustainability and social justice'.

For example, in a city such as Oxford there are around 90 organisations strongly concerned with climate issues. Up and down the country local carbon-saving projects have sprung up. Should we be celebrating such a wide range of activity and concern for the planet? Of course, at one level, but these local active groups are extremely diverse with little common focus for organising collectively. As Paul Hawken says, the movement is still *'atomised'* and *'largely ignored'*.

Leading the 'good life'

There is also a cost associated with making many of the 'life-style' changes. Many people cannot afford to buy a new low-emission car, eat more expensive food (organic/ Fairtrade/locally produced), or travel by train (notoriously more expensive than cheap flights), for example.

How do we get through to the unconvinced majority?

How useful are the personal life style messages? Is there a possibility the argument hinders the development of collective strategic planning and political action on the national and international stage when combating climate change?

The end of the world is nigh

Additionally, there's a widespread negative response to the 'millennialists' who describe climate change as heralding the end of the world.

Most people do not find it easy to face the urgency of the situation, and find it easier to prefer denial or to adopt the 'ostrich posture' (where they bury their head in the sand to ignore the obvious).

Building bridges with others

To conclude: clearly many people are attracted by the notion that they can do things themselves, through individual action. Yet there are also as many individuals (arguably more) who are put off by the emphasis placed upon behaviour change and the call to alter their lifestyle.

Our challenge is to focus upon how to build a movement that aims to collectively impact the political process, acknowledging that many people are disenchanted with the current politics. In spite of the discussion above, where we outline many possible pitfalls and disadvantages of the personal lifestyle approach and the purely local actions, we acknowledge that to build an alliance we need to respect the fact that there will, and should be, all sorts of approaches and priorities. Within alliances and coalitions there will inevitably be discussions about these priorities, and a need to review and articulate how we work together, based upon respect and value for difference of approach, strategy and even ideology.