

Prudence: a green virtue

Will economic woes push environmentalism down the political agenda? Not when being eco-friendly means saving money

One of the standard accusations brought against the environmental movement is that it's irretrievably middle class. That environmental concern is a luxury for affluent Guardian readers who can afford to worry their heads about organic fair trade chocolate, while more than 2 billion people are living on less than a dollar a day. It's rubbish, but it's persistent. Though it is not exactly surprising that the received opinion surrounding today's economic downturn is that environmental issues will disappear off the radar, and the politicians and business leaders will start back-peddling or deferring any difficult or expensive initiatives. It is a seductively simple hypothesis, but by no means as done a deal as the usual suspects would have us believe. In testing this hypothesis, what can we learn from the past? There is not a huge amount of evidence to go on here as the number of years with very low or zero economic growth since the late 1960s have been quite few and far between – and by far the most significant was around 1990.

In 1989, the Green party won 15% of the vote in the European elections, and green issues were riding high in the polls. The recession kicked in shortly after, with high levels of unemployment, household repossessions and real economic hardship. The 1992 general election was dominated by economic issues, the Green party vote crashed, and environmental issues dropped out of the news. That, however, is only half the picture. As Ian Christie has written in an excellent paper for the Green Alliance, [The Perfect Storm Warning](#):

It is not the case that green policies were dropped wholesale at that time. It is empirically not the case that there was a dramatic decline in green attitudes amongst citizens. The Department of the Environment's public attitude surveys do not indicate a sharp fall in public concerns after 1989; rather, they show a plateauing then a modest rise in interest in the late 1990s. In addition, in each survey carried out from 1986 to 2001, "environment/pollution" remained in the top five issues. It is therefore a mistake to conclude that immediate anxieties about economic conditions necessarily make people discard their concerns about the environment.

Although that is not today's "received opinion", there are other factors relating to the current downturn which should also be taken into account. Despite a relatively high media profile, green ideas in the late 1980s had relatively little traction below the surface. Whilst it was true that Margaret Thatcher's short-lived "[green period](#)" commanded a lot of attention, the Tory faithful didn't have a clue what she was banging on about, and, deep down, the Labour party in those days still subscribed to the view that the environment was indeed for middle-class elites, and therefore of near-zero relevance in their battle to resist the worst consequences of Thatcherism. That amazing Green party result in the European elections came and went like a migratory bird blown off course, and media commentators reverted all too quickly to their customary cynicism.

It isn't like that today. However difficult the mainstream parties might be finding the sustainable development agenda, they know that their own political destiny is being shaped by it more and more every year. Climate change, oil at \$140 a barrel, food security issues, obesity, public health, infrastructure, housing – even if sustainable development isn't yet the "central organising principle" of contemporary politics, more and more of the agenda is framed by it.

And it is not that dissimilar for leading businesses. The late 1980s was a time of really "frothy" green consumerism, often driven by unscrupulous marketing departments happy to ride a wave whilst only too aware that it would have little staying power. An unprecedented number of consumers became interested for the first time, but it was all very brittle, with no deeper roots – and

many of the new green products underperformed so badly that it wasn't long before the bubble burst.

By contrast, today's leading companies are well into their own sustainable development or corporate responsibility journeys. These are long-term commitments, not the product of fly-by-night opportunism, and though some initiatives might now move forwards a little more cautiously, they'll keep on moving forward.

There are two additional factors that will keep both government and the private sector focussed on their green commitments. The first is the high cost of energy. Even if you don't have an environmental bone in your body, and are amongst the 80% of people in this country (according to the latest Guardian/Mori poll) who still aren't persuaded that climate change is caused by our greenhouse gas emissions, the prospect of reducing energy bills by anything from 10% to 50% has to make a lot of sense.

By the same token, as food prices continue to rise, the first and most obvious response (from a consumer point of view) is to eliminate unnecessary food purchases, seek out real value for money, cut down on luxury treats, and make sure that everything bought actually gets eaten. (The recent study by Wrap showing that around 30% of all purchased food gets thrown away unused shows just how much people have taken cheap food for granted over the last few years.) All these things are better for people and for the environment, and as long as food retailers keep focussed on "making the sustainable affordable" it won't be the end of the world for them either

Secondly, although it is true that a downturn will change lots of things, some things carry on regardless. Legislation will not be undone just because we're going through a period of low growth. The landfill tax, for instance, will continue to rise by another £8 a tonne next year and the year after, reinforcing the increasingly clear message that generating unnecessary waste is just seriously stupid, let alone bad for the environment. Local authority recycling targets will remain as challenging as ever. And whereas the government may think of deferring the next increase in fuel taxes later this year (given the huge hike in the price of petrol and diesel), it is unlikely to give way on vehicle excise duty – a further incentive for car owners to downsize, save money and pollute less.

On all these counts, environmentalists should therefore hold their nerve, and work with politicians, business leaders and the media to demonstrate that living more sustainably is one of the most sensible and practical ways of avoiding the worst effects of any economic downturn.