

# Planet earth on critical overload

In presenting a green agenda for Europe, former MEP ANITA POLLACK fears more Green MEPs in a right-controlled European Parliament will mean less progress on green issues.

**P**R rightly meant there would be victories for smaller parties in the European election, but whether the sum total of greenness in the UK representation has been increased is debatable. I found it particularly galling, having been twice awarded the Green Ribbon for best environment member of the European Parliament and having been an environmental campaigner for thirty years, to receive commiseration letters from Labour Party members saying they voted Green. It does not yet seem to have sunk in that protest voting is not helpful under PR.

Overall, Green Party representation in the European Parliament increased from 27 to 38 but it is not clear how much of this is the result of a heightened green consciousness on the part of European voters and how much is simply voting against the big parties. Certainly with the new right wing bias in the European Parliament it is going to be extremely difficult to make progress on a green agenda.

In Germany, the Greens lost five seats probably because of power sharing in government. Many Green Party supporters are still uncomfortable with power. In Belgium where they gained three members, the big parties are out of favour with the electorate following a series of corruption scandals. It is ironic to see that the Minister now in charge of Agriculture and dealing with the dioxin crisis was formerly their Green leader in the European Parliament. French Greens did spectacularly well, tripling their previous score despite that country's notorious indifference to environmental concerns. Much of that can be put down to the huge media

hype surrounding Danny Cohn-Bendit who headed their list. In the last Parliament he represented German Greens. TV cameras were permanently camped outside his office for six months before the election, since he retains his charisma from the revolutionary days of '68.

Greens also did well in the Netherlands, whilst their representation from Nordic countries remains relatively static (slightly down in Sweden and up in Finland), since green consciousness in all parties from these countries is high. The opposite still remains true for the Mediterranean rim. Spain managed one Green, Portugal and Greece none, and Italy none although some of Emma Bonino's Radi-

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cals are supporters of green politics. Ireland hung on to its current two and Luxembourg one. Denmark continues to be more preoccupied with anti-EU parties.

Britain's two Greens were elected on around 7.5% of the vote on a turnout of 24% - hardly indicative of a sea change in favour of the environment in this country. At hustings meetings in middle class South East England, however, the Prime Minister's enthusiastic support for Monsanto and GMO (genetically modified organisms) food was hugely unpopular. The Green message of banning GMO food and banning testing found resonance with concerned audiences and Labour votes were lost in sufficient numbers to

cost Labour a seat.

The main concerns of the Green parties in their European Election manifesto are globalisation, world trade, genetic modification and road transport. The approach is characteristically simple: bans and withdrawal to protectionist local economies without a thought to jobs. The need to reform the WTO (World Trade Organisation), ensuring that environmental considerations are properly built into its rules, is widely accepted in left of centre European politics and is supported by the Labour government. But withdrawal from the WTO is not a realistic option. Our concern to bring environment into WTO rules is seen by developing countries as Western protectionism and strongly resisted. There is a big persuasion job to be done, and on this the Greens are silent.

It is painfully obvious that the environmental concerns about GMO crops have not been properly addressed. Governments have tended to focus on food safety and the biodiversity argument is a late starter in official consciousness. The GMO issue becomes tied up with WTO in the same way as Caribbean bananas and hormones in beef because the Americans are aggressively pursuing their export markets by means of WTO cases. Whether GMO crops are necessary or beneficial is pretty doubtful but the EU is still trying to slam the door too late. Once GM soya was permitted entry because EU licensing rules were being revised too slowly, it became almost impossible to stop.

What other issues face the new intake of MEPs? Members will find a tranche of specific issues on the table, some of which were partly dealt with in the old Parlia-

ment. Each one of these is likely to face tough challenges from the right.

On air pollution, several new draft directives are queuing up: benzene and ozone for instance. Progress on these comes back to the perennial nasty – what to do about motor transport. This is why the success of John Prescott's initiatives in his Transport White Paper is intrinsically bound up with implementing European legislation both on the books and in the pipeline. Screams from the trucking lobby about the UK's fuel tax indicate that this is one of the big problems of our age. The Water Framework Directive and Landfill of Waste are waiting for a second reading as are eco management and pollution from large combustion plants. Some of these are technical, such as recycling end of life vehicles. The latter will come back to the European Parliament after serious mauling by the Council of Ministers, but it may be impossible to carry the votes needed to reinstate some of the provisions demanded by Parliament in the days of left domination.

On end of life vehicles, it was the German government's Green Environment Minister who was forced by Chancellor Schroeder to back down in the face of heavy lobbying from the German car industry. Overcapacity and unemployment in this sector has made it a sensitive issue. Britain, for whom this was not such a hotly publicised matter, was minded to support Germany to gain support from that country for our efforts to safeguard thousands of UK jobs in the city threatened by the proposed withholding tax. This sort of deal on unrelated issues remains endemic to the secretive way the Council of Ministers does business behind closed doors. Transparency is still more of a slogan than a reality. Whilst there was much lip service and fanfare paid to opening up Council decision-making during the British Presidency, new Labour in government has discovered the seductive charms of secrecy as a way of doing business. Democracy is the loser.

Greening the government at home and greening the EU budget remains of pivotal importance but as yet progress is slow. Environmental sustainability, whilst now enshrined in the Amsterdam Treaty has not extended to fisheries and agriculture, or trade policy. Furthermore, the structural funds need an eagle eye kept on them to ensure that the fine words in Agenda 2000 are matched by green policies in their implementation.

Climate change is slipping away from being tackled. Governments around the world fear the effects on their industries or their votes from policies needed to make progress. Whilst the European Parliament was permitted to send a tiny team of representatives to the UN Climate



Anita Pollack and one of the major Green issues - transport pollution

Change conference in Kyoto <sup>little</sup> and again to Buenos Aires, there is still participation in negotiations. The Council has actually refused to expand the Parliament's role. Yet in national Parliaments the scrutiny of what Ministers do in international negotiations is inadequate and liaison between MPs and MEPs (certainly in the UK) prior to these big set-piece conferences is woefully lacking.

The European campaign on climate change centres on calls for a directive on renewable energy with legally binding targets (long overdue) and trying to find ways of ensuring that EU member states actually implement their agreed targets for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. There is still no agreement on a common negotiating position on flexible mechanisms and industry is chafing at the bit wanting to start a system of tradable permits in greenhouse gas emissions. No real signs have yet emerged that the USA is intending to ratify the Kyoto protocol and the Group of 77 developing countries maintains its position of doing nothing about greenhouse emissions until the USA makes a move. Meanwhile in Europe, the debate on energy taxes trundles on with no sign of political will to reach an agreement.

In a world where the most important environmental problems face us at an international level, paradoxically most citizens' campaigning takes place at a local level (eg incinerators, planning, roads). And whilst the European Union gives the UK about 80% of its environmental law, this is neither understood by the public nor publicised by the government.

Government departments and parliamentary committees both in the UK and in Europe which are organised in vertical lines make it virtually impossible to achieve "joined up government thinking". But unless the environment is integrated holistically across all these areas, progress will continue to be stalled. Sustainability

must move away from being a slogan and form the basis for action across subject borders.

The big global issues are tackled if at all by inter-governmental means. Building dams or motorways may be environmentally problematic but are dealt with by trade ministers who appear solely interested in the profitability of national firms and their investments. Overfishing and pollution are depleting marine life but are seen as agricultural responsibilities rather than environmental ones. Hormone depleting chemicals are damaging species but governments are reluctant to do more than wait for science to prove the case, which can take decades. Some developing countries are the location for a vast amount of global environmental damage yet how to wield effective pressure on corrupt or non-democratic governments appears to be beyond us. Tropical forests, oceans and fresh water are inadequately dealt with yet citizens tend to agitate mostly on home issues such as roads and planning.

With the planet at the limits of critical overload will the pressure of two Green Members of the European Parliament from Britain (bearing in mind the loss of a group of committed Labour environmentalists) change the balance of power? Sadly I think not and we need a much better informed and environmentally aware public to push governments towards the much needed reforms which they are so reluctant to implement. So far the signs seem to be that Romano Prodi as the new President of the European Commission will be more interested in expanding the EU's role in foreign policy than in the important but less politically weighty area of the environment.

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