

Making your footprint less

CEL Interview with Jonathon Porritt

by Mike Monaghan

Jonathon Porritt warmly commends CEL and believes Operation Noah is really important.

CEL Patron Jonathon Porritt was interviewed recently by Mike Monaghan.

For thirty years Jonathon Porritt has been one of the UK's best known environmentalists. From 1975 to 1984 he was co-chair of the Ecology (later Green) Party, and was Director of Friends of the Earth from 1984 until 1991.

After a period of freelance consulting in the run-up to and after the Rio Earth Summit, including setting up The Prince of Wales's Business & the Environment Programme, he founded Forum for the Future in 1996. He was appointed to head up the Government's Sustainable Development Commission in 2000. The interview took place at Forum for the Future's offices in Cheltenham.



After thirty years, don't you get disheartened that the state of the environment continues to deteriorate and those in power just don't seem to have got the message?

No, I don't get disheartened. I have a very strong sense of rising curves of awareness and of commitment and reducing curves of resistance and denial.

I spend quite a lot of time keeping track of historical shifts in mind-sets and behaviour changes, and this reaffirms my positive conviction about progress.

I do get very frustrated and angry, and indeed mystified, at the resistance of people to move faster especially as it won't even be particularly painful to move on many of these issues.

Of course one area which causes great concern is the inept and dreadfully destructive US Administration, but as their policies lead to ever greater problems and the public wake up to this, one can anticipate change even here.

Over this period, what have been the main successes and the main failures of the environmental movement?

One needs to look at this in two ways.

Firstly, we can take comfort from the very marked shift in public attitudes which the environmental movement can take credit for; this is not an outcome per se, but it predisposes people to act more responsibly, which is crucial and we can see the results of this.

On top of this one can think of a number of examples of real progress.

At the international level, for example, the elimination of ozone-depleting chemicals, which came about as a result initially of a lot of robust consumer campaigning. Although there are still significant amounts of CFCs being manufactured in China and Russia, and it will take decades for the ozone layer to recover, the international treaty (the Montreal Protocol) did constitute a significant achievement.

Closer to home, one of the unsung achievements is the improvement in water quality. People forget that as recently as 10 years ago many British bathing beaches were off-limits because of pollution levels, but now most have very high standards. Similarly, there has been a vast improvement in river quality.

The most massive failure in this country is on transport issues. So little has changed and there is little change in public attitudes; the comparison with continental Europe is stark.

Internationally, the biggest failure is the protection of the rain forest. Rates of deforestation now are little better than they were thirty years ago when international campaigning on the issue began.

Do you see the recent Up in Smoke report, bringing development and environmental groups together, as an important step?

Yes I do. It is very encouraging.

I recall the difficulty we had in 1993 when we put together the Real World Coalition. There was great resistance to the idea that there was a converging agenda of social, ethical and environmental issues. Most development organisations were dismissive of the idea of sustainability, and felt environmentalists were largely middle-class, privileged, Guardian-reading, muesli-munchers who were not bothered about poverty, health, third world development etc.

Up in Smoke is important, therefore, as it embraces the notion of mutual dependency; that if you want to improve people's quality of life you have to secure their physical environment, provide proper environmental protection and resource management etc. Sustainability has to be the overarching framework within which everything has to be resolved. This now appears to be winning some space in development organisations' thinking, which I warmly applaud.

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is the “Government’s independent advisor” in this area. Do they take any notice of it?

Yes, they do. Not as much as one would like, but in areas where we have been able to bring most influence to bear, we have had a real impact – most notably on the Government’s strategy for farming and food (which is a huge improvement on what went before) and the Energy White Paper. Although implementation has been much slower than one would have wanted, it lays a strong foundation for a sustainable energy strategy.

Other areas have seen less progress. The Treasury doesn’t currently wish to bring the whole issue of sustainability and economic growth back into the political debate; very little progress with the Department of Transport, mixed with the Department of Industry, but good relations with the Department for Education, with Health, and with DEFRA itself.

But we will see the proof of what’s been happening when the new sustainable development strategy comes out in March next year. This is an important milestone.

Is the phrase “sustainable development” a contradiction in terms? Shouldn’t we refer to sustainable sufficiency?

I am very resistant to rejecting the phrase “sustainable development”. It says exactly what the world needs to do, which is to develop, but to do so sustainably. The idea that we are going to have a future without development is, frankly, insane.

Up to 5 billion of the 6 billion people on this earth desperately need further development to improve their life chances, their basic conditions and their core entitlements; this is an incredibly powerful argument.

I do worry about the phrase “sustainable growth” unless it is very carefully qualified, but sustainable development has complete integrity and intellectual rigour and should be supported.

Do we need a simple powerful measure of sustainability similar to the measure of economic growth of GDP? People get confused with all the indicators.

Governments are not going to ditch using GDP as an indicator, and that’s fine. Unfortunately, however, contrary to what many economists advise, it is used as the only indicator, not just of economic activity but of overall success. That tells us nothing about how the economic activity is improving people’s well being, or the damage done to the environment.

We do, therefore, need alternative ways of looking at the overall picture, and I would like to see an index such as the *Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare*, which could sit alongside GDP. But not all green economists agree.

We have a Government saying on the one hand climate change is one of the most important issues facing mankind, and on the other announcing a huge expansion in airport construction. This seems to be nonsense – is it?

Yes.

But one should not be too surprised about a lot of “nonsense” going on over the course of the next decade or so. We are in what I call the transition zone; a period of political development which is still dominated by mind-sets and orthodoxies which go right back to the post Second World War period. Most politicians are set in that mould, and although they know we are entering a new era of political and economic development, they are still stuck half-way in the old mould.

So, for example, we have a Prime Minister who is absolutely sincere in his commitment to doing something about climate change, while simultaneously condoning a decision by his Secretary of State for Transport for a massive increase in air travel.

That type of contradictory inconsistency is going to be with us for some time to come. There would be less of that inconsistency if the media, particularly the right-wing media, were more supportive of the efforts being made by politicians and businesses.

Nuclear Energy?

Our article on Nuclear Power in the last issue by David Penney brought some combative response, notably from the Association for Nuclear Energy. In the interests of open debate we have reproduced a long letter from Richard Hore-Lacey the association’s secretary.

We have been offered further responses, pro and anti-nuclear. In the light of the increasingly negative predictions about the irreversible effects of CO₂ emissions sooner than later many are wondering if nuclear energy can at least ‘fill the gap’. CEL continues to take the attitude articulated by Jonathon Porritt in this interview.

CEL is however committed not only to encouraging debate but promoting debate. In the next issue of Green Christian a new regular series will begin, called ‘In Transit’. This is an opportunity for anyone to offer their reflections on their personal journey on an issue of concern. In view of the importance of this debate we have invited CEL patron Hugh Montefiore to reflect on his change of opinion after so many years.

CEL is also in the process of organising a high-profile public debate bringing together leaders and experts to help set out the known facts about nuclear energy, nuclear waste, renewable energy and its potential, lifestyle and sustainable development.

Nuclear Waste

From the Autumn 2004 Issue of Earth Quaker, the Journal of Quaker green action; “A New Scientist” article on 17 July 2004, stated that radiation experts have found that low level internal radiation is 10 times more dangerous than previously thought and may lead to new international safety limits being needed. The Quaker article suggest contacting The Low Level Radiation Campaign for more information.
Tel. 01597 824771
www.llrc.org

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Nuclear energy is a hotly debated topic within CEL.

In your view should nuclear energy be part of the future efforts in this country and elsewhere to reduce greenhouse gas emissions?

I recently attended the farewell party at FoE for Bishop Hugh Montefiore who has been asked to step down as a Trustee because of his advocacy of nuclear power! So this is a lively debate. The line of the SDC, whose members represent a very wide cross-section of views, is in our report Future Energy Scenarios. In this we appraised the potential contribution of nuclear against the potential contribution from other sources - and energy efficiency. On a straight technology/cost comparison nuclear comes out bottom of the list in most categories - cost, technological viability, security, waste, decommissioning. However, nobody should rule out nuclear forever. There is no moral reason for saying it is an inherently wicked technology. We should keep on appraising it - but right now, in my view, it is not part of the picture for tackling climate change.

As for utilising/downgrading stocks of plutonium, the only way currently to do this is in a Fast Breeder Reactor, which no nation has succeeded in being able to manage. The costs are simply unsustainable. We should continue our search for other ways to tackle this issue, but not via a nuclear energy programme.

Can we stabilise world climate whilst China continues to industrialise, using coal as a primary energy source?

That is a tough one. I am a member of a governmental international Task Force on climate change involving Britain, the US and Australia which will report in February. China figured heavily in our considerations as we arrived at a consensus view that one of the biggest impacts the West could have on climate change per \$ of investment, would be putting the money into China for energy efficiency and state-of-the-art coal-based energy generation (such as coal-gasification technologies), which massively reduces carbon dioxide emissions. The technology is available, but this is obviously a politically sensitive issue as it is equivalent to direct support for China's development.

Will climate change produce a new ice age for Britain or sweltering summers and very wet winters? People are confused on this issue.

Firstly, we have to keep different time-scales in our minds. We are moving inexorably towards a new ice age, but it is reckoned to be a few thousand years before we need to be too concerned about that!

Much sooner than that we are going to go through an accelerated period of warming, which may even change the pattern of climate between glacial and inter-glacial periods. The possibility of the UK getting much colder could occur as a result of the melting of the Arctic and the Greenland ice sheets, which may well change the flow of the Gulf stream.

But what we should be focusing on here are the causes. We can be sure that continuing to emit the current level of greenhouse gases will result in extremely serious adverse effects.

In the Foreword to Ian Bradley's seminal book God is Green in 1989 you wrote "we are the last generation likely to be given the choice 'of becoming' stewards of God's creation". Do you still hold this view?

I think I do.

This generation is beginning to understand its historic role, particularly in respect to bio-diversity. People are becoming aware of the accelerating rate of extinction that we are causing, and there is a change in perception of our responsibilities as the dominant species. However, if we don't make a big impact in the next ten years we will have seriously diminished the diversity of species. The principal issue in all these considerations is the irreversibility. Extinction of species is about as irreversible as you can get!

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MAKE POVERTY HISTORY

Tens of thousands of people have already emailed Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and other politicians to tell them to make poverty history in 2005. Thanks for playing your part. Together we're beginning to be heard. But there's still a long way to go.

To help us get there, Nelson Mandela has made a short film to remind us all how important it is to keep up the pressure. After you've watched the film (<http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/video1.htm>), please forward it to three friends who you think would like to know about the campaign. Let's make 2005 a historic year.

Thanks for your support,
Lenny Henry

P.S Those fantastic guys from Keane have also shown their support by recording a special version of 'What a Wonderful World'. You can download it for free at MAKEPOVERTY HISTORY website. (<http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/keane.html>)

'Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that generation.'
Nelson Mandela.

KEEP IN TOUCH WITH CEL BY E-MAIL

For both members and non-members: CEL Monthly News e-mail. You are invited to send in your e-mail address to be put on the monthly news list. CEL Prayer Guide can be received by e-mail if requested.

For members: CELINK, CEL's discussion email group, has over 70 members; you can join.

Simply send your email address to webeditor@christian-ecology.org.uk and request what you would like.

Books

God is Green

by Ian Bradley
Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990



Jesus and the Earth,

by James Jones, SPCK
Reviewed in *Green Christian* Issue 54
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