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Oikophilia and the Poetics of Conservative Environmentalism

In 1948, Richard M. Weaver reminded us that ideas have consequences.² This is why conservatives should engage their opponents on any issue on the ideational level – and no issue should be seen as intrinsically left-wing. This includes environmental issues. As in rugby, if you do not commit players to the maul, you cannot win the ball. Yet some conservatives seem to have accepted that they cannot be environmentalists; that the idea of conservative environmentalism is a paradox, an oxymoron. As Katey Castellano observes, environmentalism “is usually affiliated with liberalism” and “woke” politics.³ That assumption has led Jonathan Bate, in his work on Wordsworth’s “ecological” poetry, to conclude that Wordsworth must also have been a liberal.⁴ Roger Scruton remarks: “Conservatives then wrongly dismiss the whole environmental movement as a socially divisive one [...] and try to pretend that the environment is an exclusively left-wing concern, and one that has no place in conservative political thinking.”⁵ As a result, as John R. E. Bliese points out, conservatives have tended to give their support instead to businesses that prefer less environmental regulation.⁶

¹ I am most grateful to Dr Sebastian Morello and Christopher Fear as well as the participants of *The Post-Liberal-Turn and the Future of British Conservatism* conference for their comments on my presentation and on earlier drafts of this chapter. Indeed, any mistakes and/or typos are mine alone.

² WEAVER 2013.

³ CASTELLANO 2011: 73–91.

⁴ BATE 1991.

⁵ SCRUTON 2006: 19.

⁶ BLIESE 2002.

I will argue here, however, that there is a traditional conservative perspective upon the politics of the environment, non-liberal and anti-woke, that is plausible, coherent and persuasive – and probably also popular. Similarly, Peter Huber argues that modern liberal environmentalism is deceptive, and actually harms rather than protects the environment. For Huber, the environment needs saving from the so-called environmentalists. My method for recovering the conservative perspective on environmental politics is holistic, drawing on key conservative thinkers, writers, poets and politicians – historical and contemporary – from Edmund Burke to Wendell Berry. We can discover, I think, that a thread of environmental protection and enhancement runs through the Tory tradition. Recovering that perspective is worthwhile for not merely academic reasons. Maintaining a stable and flourishing natural environment should be a concern for everyone, especially for conservatives. But despite the comprehensiveness of the literature, we also discover seven basic principles emerging from it, which suggest certain policy proposals.

A CONSERVATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL TRADITION?

Although “conservative intellectuals have largely ignored the environment”, as John Bliese observed in 1997,⁷ “politicians who call themselves conservatives have not”.⁸ However (he explains), they have attended to environmental debates only to attempt “to block virtually every attempt to clean up pollution, protect the environment, and conserve”.⁹ It is little surprise, then, that, as Scruton explains:

Environmentalists have been habituated to see conservatism as the ideology of free enterprise, and free enterprise as an assault on the earth’s resources, with no motive beyond the

⁷ BLIESE 1997: 1.

⁸ BLIESE 1997: 1.

⁹ BLIESE 1997: 1.

short-term gains that animate the market. Those who have called themselves conservatives in the political context are in part responsible for this misperception.¹⁰

Conservatives have indeed emphasised economic choice – and have been right to do so, to a certain extent. But choice has limits, and unfortunately Conservative politicians have said much less about the unchosen obligations that maintain the conditions of meaningful choice. There are of course exceptions. Margaret Thatcher in a speech called *Dimensions of Conservatism* said, to a meeting of Young Conservatives at Caxton Hall in London, in 1977:

Free enterprise has a place, an honoured place in our scheme of things, but as one of many dimensions. For Tories became Tories well before the modern concept of a free market economy meant anything.¹¹

R. V. Young, Jr., too, argued that – though “discussion of the relationship between conservatism and environmental affairs seems a hopelessly complicated task”¹² – “it is possible to maintain a coherent conservative attitude toward the environmental controversy”. Young added that a “conservative must insist that the only answer to our current ecologic crisis is to recognize it as a moral crisis and return to traditional virtues. Self-restraint, humility, and (Weaver’s term) piety are all important features of the conservative temper”.¹³ Profoundly, Weaver perceived that “the attitude toward nature [...] is a matter so basic to one’s outlook or philosophy of life that we often tend to overlook it”.¹⁴ He then precognitively remarked that “if we do overlook it, we find there are many things coming later which we cannot straighten out”.¹⁵

¹⁰ SCRUTON 2006: 7.

¹¹ THATCHER 1977: 4.

¹² YOUNG 1979: 253.

¹³ YOUNG 1979: 253.

¹⁴ WEAVER 1987: 209.

¹⁵ WEAVER 1987: 209.

MEMORY, IMAGINATION, COUNTRYSIDE AND PRINCIPLES

William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* trace the growth of the mind, and both note the positive impact that nature and the countryside can have on our mental state, such as memory, imagination and sympathy:

From Nature doth emotion come, and moods
Of calmness equally are Nature's gift:
This is her glory; these two attributes
Are sister horns that constitute her strength.
Hence Genius, born to thrive by interchange
Of peace and excitation, finds in her
His best and purest friend; from her receives
That energy by which he seeks the truth,
From her that happy stillness of the mind
Which fits him to receive it when unsought¹⁶

Indeed, Bliese provided nine principles in his work and these are: (1) realising a conservative is not a materialist; (2) observing piety, especially piety toward nature; (3) practicing prudence; (4) understanding society is intergenerational; (5) respecting the freedom of the individual; (6) taking responsibility for one's actions, the corollary of freedom; (7) respecting private property rights; and from the marketplace, (8) internalising negative externalities in prices; and (9) ending harmful governmental interventions in the market. There is considerable overlap in the principles that emerged from the literature. These principles that together underpin a traditionalist conservative environmentalism: (1) oikophilia; (2) trusteeship; (3) localism; (4) intergenerational obligations; (5) piety; (6) embeddedness; and (7) prudence. This conservative environmentalism is a moral one, rather than an economic or

¹⁶ WORDSWORTH 1850: 335.

“resource-based” position. It seems that one of the advantages of this moral position is that liberal and woke positions for the environment are generally considered to be the only two moral positions available and that conservatism does not have a moral position.

OIKOPHILIA: THE LOVE OF HOME

Three powerful words, “love – of – home”, provide the starting point for a traditionalist conservative view of the environment. Scruton believed that “nobody seems to have identified a motive more likely to serve the environmentalist cause than this one, of the shared love for our home”.¹⁷ I will follow Scruton and call it “oikophilia”: as he explains, the “*oikos* is the place that is not just mine and yours but *ours*”.¹⁸ Indeed, it is fundamental to conservative environmentalism that my neighbourhood, my town, my country and my planet are also *yours*. Only then do *we* begin to acknowledge the obligations entailed by such a viewpoint: obligations to each other, but also *our* obligations to others, including those who are yet to be born. Future people will also need a home, and therefore they will need what homes are made of. Most obviously homes are *places*, and this means more than just “spaces”: places are limited, shaped, organised and customised. Hence our intuitive admiration for the towns that others have made and adapted for good living and meaningful activity, and maintained with care and attention: elegant buildings and street-scapes, squares that draw you in and foster civility, thriving and well-managed plants and wildlife, good use of water, and so on. This is not entirely about material. Building and maintaining a home, and living well in it, requires that the inhabitants have some sense of the shared history and “memory” of a place in which they participate, and some sense of the customs of the place. At the very least, they should have a basic idea of their role in upholding

¹⁷ SCRUTON 2006: 18.

¹⁸ SCRUTON 2013: 106 (emphasis added).

decent “household management”. As Wendell Berry puts it in *A Place on Earth*: “Nobody can discover the world for somebody else. Only when we discover it for ourselves does it become common ground and a common bond and we cease to be alone.”¹⁹ Thus, we discover the immanent obligations of the shared home: they are not imported from without – whether the lofty announcements of transnational institutions or international pressure groups – and we cannot substitute our own selfish preferences unilaterally, like angry adolescents who try to live only by their own principles while expecting to share the benefits of their parents’ household.

A positive environmentalism requires popular consent and “buy-in”. Indeed, David Hume taught us that without promises there can be no long-term relations, and that the institution of promise-making depends upon trust. That is why woke groups, such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, do more harm to their causes than good. They try to remedy their lack of local “buy-in” by adopting the tactics of inconvenience and moral browbeating, but this erodes even further the basic fund of trust between adult strangers that they might previously have enjoyed: thus, clumsily putting their untrustworthiness on public display, they alienate ordinary, civically-minded local people. By stark contrast, the traditionalist conservative perspective recognises that environmental sustainability depends upon trust, and that trust is nourished by actions that communicate love of the fabric, history and customs of the *oikos*. Consequently, environmentalists should not see themselves as local agents of a universal global movement, but responsible stewards of the going concern of the particular parish. This does not leave global problems unaddressed, since the universal is made of those very particulars: if you look after the pennies, the pounds will look after themselves. Global problems are resolved by the invisible hand of place-based solutions. This position does contradict the dominant narrative and belief system of most of the world’s non-governmental organisations (NGOs), so there is even some working consensus with those who apply more directly Peter Singer’s premise that moral obligations cannot

¹⁹ BERRY 2001.

be geographically contingent – even while, on other grounds, we might at least call that premise into question.

If this sounds like a “Tory” attitude to the landscape, rather than a “Whig” one – to draw on Everett²⁰ – then I would agree. For Everett, the Tory view of the landscape emphasises the traditional, the natural, the Christian and the organic; whereas the Whig view foregrounds ownership of the impersonal, and prizes a concept of improvement based upon utility.²¹ What I am calling conservative environmentalism prioritises the Tory view, and recognises the shortcomings of the Whig. Not everything that we love can (or should) be given a monetary value, including in nature. Theodore Roosevelt observed that “to waste, to destroy, our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the day of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed”.²²

Our landscape, countryside and urban dwellings are meaningful and irreplaceable, and understandably many feel a moral duty to our environment and also an emotional desire to work to conserve them. It is a long-standing thesis that beauty is an intrinsic value. To look on a thing as beautiful is to value it for what it is, not for what it does, or for the external end it serves. We need to enhance the beautiful and overcome uglification and the fake in our landscape. Doing so will protect, enhance, and safeguard the place where we live and our environment. As Wordsworth writes:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; –
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;

²⁰ For an analysis of how this typology is still impacting the Conservative Party see PITT 2021: 267–291.

²¹ EVERETT 1994.

²² ROOSEVELT 1907.

The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.²³

EMBEDDEDNESS IN PLACE

Mark Mitchell writes of the allure of home: we “live and breathe and have our being in the context of a particular place in time”.²⁴ Mitchell also notes that “each place has a unique history embodied in the land, the people, the human artifacts and the stories”. He concludes from this that without these we are “nomads” and become “strangers in a strange land”.²⁵ In the *Quest for Community*, the social scientist Robert Nisbet indicated a similar argument regarding identity. For Nisbet, the autonomous individual as abstractly construed in modernity was left isolated, without context and barren before the state. Moreover Simone Weil, in the *Need for Roots*, remarks that “[t]o be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul”.²⁶ It seems then that the need for roots is also important if the environmental perspective is to be coherent and motivating, especially for those left cold or repelled by the forms that mainline environmentalism currently takes. This is a core and pressing task, for any of us who aims to be, as Weil puts it,

²³ WORDSWORTH 1807: 122.

²⁴ MITCHELL 2012: 57.

²⁵ MITCHELL 2012: 57.

²⁶ WEIL 2001: 40.

[A] human being by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in the living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.²⁷

Berry wrote that “[t]he care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope”. Indeed, “we pray, not, for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear. What we need is here.”²⁸ This traditionist view suggests that conserving one’s local culture and one’s environment go hand in glove.

LOCALISM: OUTWARDS AND UPWARDS

Tocqueville wrote that “the strength of free peoples resides in the local community”.²⁹ Indeed, localists, who look after the place that is theirs with local attention, are easily motivated to take the first and most necessary step towards sustainability, which is to identify a territory as *theirs* and to form free associations, “little platoons”, to sustain it as a neighbourhood. According to this perspective, such a neighbourhood is to be protected, embellished and looked after for the benefit of descendants. This is, as Berry puts it, “thinking little” (i.e. thinking local, rather than global), like farmers with established “connection[s] to their land”, which are “often hereditary and traditional”. Berry observes that:

The corporations [...] will never be bound to the land by the sense of birthright and community, or by the love that enforces care. They will be bound by the rule of efficiency, which takes thought only of the volume of the year’s produce, and takes no thought of the slow increment of life of the land [...].³⁰

²⁷ WEIL 2001: 41.

²⁸ BERRY 2017.

²⁹ TOCQUEVILLE 2003: 62–63.

³⁰ BERRY 2017.

Perhaps, we should start local but not finish local. Burke's thinking is useful here, as he notes the series by which we proceed toward the love of our country and beyond. Burke writes:

To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind.³¹

Indeed, living a conservative life,³² and settling down and marking time,³³ will lead us to love of mankind and respect for the planet. Wordsworth wrote about the love of nature leading to love of man:

Thus was man,
Ennobled outwardly before my sight,
And thus my heart was early introduced,
To an unconscious love and reverence,
Of human nature; hence the human form,
To me became an index of delight,
Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.³⁴

The nation-state or the “community-through-time”³⁵ is fundamental to conserving our environment. As Scruton wrote:

Rather than attempt to rectify environmental and social problems on the global level, conservatives seek local controls and a reassertion of local sovereignty over known and managed environments. This means affirming the right of nations to self-government and to the adoption of policies that will chime with local loyalties and sentiments of

³¹ BURKE 1790: 68.

³² HAZONY 2022.

³³ SCRUTON 2017a.

³⁴ WORDSWORTH 1850: 218.

³⁵ SCRUTON 1980: 48.

national pride. The attachment to territory and the desire to protect that territory from erosion and waste remain a powerful motive, and one that is presupposed in all demands for sacrifice that issue from the mouths of politicians [...]. For this motive is the simple and powerful one, of love for one's home.³⁶

He argues that, without the nation, the long-term perspective is seemingly impossible to grasp as part of politics.³⁷ It is the last concrete relationship before relationships become an abstraction, and abstract relationships are unable to support what effective environmentalism requires: trust and the long-term perspective.

TRUSTEESHIP AND THE OBLIGATION OF STEWARDSHIP

According to Burke the present generation are always trustees of the heritage and culture that have been inherited. Likewise, Scruton writes:

The purpose of politics, on this view, is not to rearrange society in the interests of some overarching vision or ideal, such as equality, liberty or fraternity. It is to maintain a vigilant resistance to the entropic forces that erode our social and ecological inheritance. The goal is to pass on to future generations, and if possible to enhance, the order and equilibrium of which we are the temporary trustees.³⁸

Weaver writes that:

Man has a duty of veneration toward nature and the natural. Nature is not something to be fought, conquered and changed according to any human whims. To some extent, of course, it has to be used. But what man should seek in regard to nature is not a complete

³⁶ SCRUTON 2006: 15.

³⁷ SCRUTON 1980: 48. See also HAZONY 2018 for the case of the nation state.

³⁸ SCRUTON 2006: 8.

dominion but a *modus vivendi* – that is, a manner of living together, a coming to terms with something that was here before our time and will be here after it.³⁹

T. S. Eliot provided typology between using and exploiting nature.⁴⁰ This orientation leads to stewardship over nature and of husbanding resources. Indeed, the conservative environmental perspective argues that this burden of stewardship that we inherit cannot be sustained unaided, and that the disposition to give thanks for our existence and reverence to the world on which we depend is deeply engrained in Tory thought and also necessary for protection of our environment.

INTERGENERATIONAL OBLIGATIONS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

According to Rossiter “[t]he spirit of trusteeship – the sense of receiving a precious heritage and handing it on intact and perhaps even slightly strengthened – pervades Conservatism”.⁴¹ Trusteeship is a core principle of conservative environmentalism, and this provides the link to our intergenerational obligations. The need to take seriously our unchosen obligations and the conservation of our environment is core to Toryism. We know that we have obligations to honour parents that we did not choose, to defend a country that we did not choose, and to conserve places – landscapes – that we did not choose. We need to take these unchosen obligations seriously, and they ought to be the basis of any Conservative platform – as Disraeli did in his *Vindication of the English Constitution*, when he defended it on the basis that it was made by something that is “ten thousand times better than choice. It is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions and moral, social civil habitudes of the people, which disclose

³⁹ WEAVER 1987: 220–221.

⁴⁰ ELIOT 1949: 26.

⁴¹ ROSSITER 1955: 64–66.

themselves only in a long space of time”.⁴² Indeed, the social conditions, such as the family, transfer social capital from one generation to the next, and the utmost significant renewable resource is, of course, us. Scruton argues that “when family life fails to play its part, we must expect our culture to deteriorate”.⁴³ Under such conditions, I would argue, we should also expect the “family estate”, our shared environment, to deteriorate, too. As Burke observed, “the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement”.⁴⁴ Our obligations are not a contract between the living only, but between the living, the unborn and the dead.⁴⁵ Scruton wrote that it is not “a contract at all, but a relation of trusteeship”.⁴⁶ Yes, intergenerational obligations, but what about intergenerational fairness?⁴⁷ First, what does a conservative think of fairness? It seems an inclination towards Aristotle’s “proper proportion” view of fairness – meaning that it would be unfair for a person to receive a greater or smaller proportion of the good than what he himself has earned. Thus, tying together Aristotle’s “proper proportion” and Burke’s transgenerational view of society, we can see that debt, deficit, environment and pollution are matters for the yet-unborn, for us, and perhaps also for the dignity and memory of our forebears. It is incumbent upon the present-day generation to take only our proper proportion, and not to rack-up debts for the unborn, or to bequeath to them a huge and complex ecological crisis.

⁴² DISRAELI 1835: 24.

⁴³ ELIOT 1973.

⁴⁴ BURKE 1790: 48.

⁴⁵ BURKE 1790: 143–144.

⁴⁶ SCRUTON 1980: 10.

⁴⁷ I thank a delegate at the conference on *The Post-Liberal Turn and the Future of British Conservatism Conference* for the question on fairness and not just obligation.

PRUDENCE:
A MODERATING PRINCIPLE

Some conservatives have seen environmentalism as single-issue fanaticism which is hostile to politics of prudence.⁴⁸ Burke, Kirk and other conservative thinkers have placed a high value on prudence.⁴⁹ It is useful here to quote Ferenc Hörcher:

Politics is done by political agents (individuals and communities), who talk, decide and act in order to influence their political environment, and to change the world around them as far as it can be changed by human, political means. They interact with their natural and social environment, and by this praxis try to have an impact on both. To achieve success in these interactions, they need a kind of applied, embodied knowledge, which is unlike *epistémé*, *scientia* or *sophia*, in our terms, unlike abstract, conceptual knowledge. What they need is not necessarily reflected, but rather experience-based, practice-oriented, pragmatic knowledge. This sort of knowledge is called “prudence” (Latin *prudentia*, Greek *phronesis*, English practical wisdom). Practical knowledge may have different forms, not all of them politically oriented. This book is interested in practical political knowledge.⁵⁰

Thus, any statesman putting “conservative environmentalism” into practice and policy should do so with prudence and practical wisdom. Conservatives do not aim to create a green Utopia or restore the Garden of Eden. Thatcher herself rejected the promises of Green Pelagianism in 1978: “As a Christian, I am bound to shun utopias on this earth and to recognise that there is no change in Man’s social arrangements which will make him perfectly good and perfectly happy.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ For an in-depth work on prudence and conservatism see HÖRCHER 2020.

⁴⁹ KIRK 2023; ROSSITER 1955.

⁵⁰ HÖRCHER 2020: 163.

⁵¹ THATCHER 1978.

NATURAL PIETY:
THE CROWNING CONCEPT

Wordsworth evoked the concept of “natural piety” in *My Heart Leaps Up*:

A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.⁵²

In *Human Nature*, Scruton explains that the “main task of political conservatism, as represented by Burke, Maistre, and Hegel, was to put obligations of piety back where they belong, at the centre of the picture”.⁵³ Maistre argued that we ought to have piety towards established things, and placed divinely ordained traditions above the urges of self-interest. Similarly, Weaver defines piety as “a discipline of the will through respect. It admits the right to exist of things larger than the ego, of things different from the ego”.⁵⁴ The concept of piety is also raised in the *Euthyphro*, one of Plato’s early dialogues. Answering Socrates’s challenge, Euthyphro defines piety as “what all the gods love”.⁵⁵ It is, as Weaver explains, a cooperation with the “gods in the kind of order they have instituted”, and is thus part of a “larger concept of justice”.⁵⁶ Weaver adds that “[p]iety is a discipline of the will through respect”.⁵⁷ Moreover, Weaver believed

⁵² WORDSWORTH 1807: 44.

⁵³ SCRUTON 2017b: 126.

⁵⁴ WEAVER 2013: 154.

⁵⁵ Pl. *Euthyphr.* 9e.

⁵⁶ WEAVER 2013: 154.

⁵⁷ WEAVER 2013: 154.

that we are required to “regard the spirit of piety” to three things. These are (1) nature; (2) neighbours; and (3) the past.⁵⁸ According to Bliese, piety in this area is “based on the humble acknowledgment that we live in a world which we did not create, and that we inhabit it for only a brief span of time”.⁵⁹

We can also learn from the Roman view of piety: that we are required to honour our parents and ancestors, the household deities, the laws and the civil order; that we keep the appointed festivals and public ceremonies, and maintain a punctilious respect towards sacred things. In short, piety is the recognition of the limitations of human understanding and control; and obligations to the landscape, both rural and urban. Like Weaver and Bliese, I see piety as a “crowning concept”,⁶⁰ and agree with Bliese that it is “the over-arching attitude which should govern our attitudes toward everything else in the world”.⁶¹ Indeed, a natural gratitude is due for what is given and we express it, in part, by fulfilling our unchosen obligations. Burke wrote that those who do not offer due piety to those of the past will never find any real concern for their children or grandchildren.⁶² In terms of our relationship with nature and our environment, we require is diffuse gratitude or a shared gratitude diffused amongst different generations – including the dead. But, as Weaver asks, “are those who died heroes’ and martyrs’ deaths really dead?” He suggests that they are not, as they live in how they shape(d) “our dream of the world”.⁶³ More concretely, they have maintained and bequeathed that world to us. Scruton points out that people make sacrifices for the things that they love,⁶⁴ and asks, “[a]nd when do these sacrifices benefit the unborn?”⁶⁵ His answer was “[w]hen they are made for the dead”.⁶⁶ These ideas of “givenness”, piety and respect for the

⁵⁸ WEAVER 2013: 154.

⁵⁹ BLIESE 1997: 1, 7.

⁶⁰ WEAVER 2013: 154.

⁶¹ BLIESE 1997: 1, 7.

⁶² BIRZER 2016.

⁶³ WEAVER 2013: 159.

⁶⁴ SCRUTON 2009: 191.

⁶⁵ SCRUTON 2009: 191.

⁶⁶ SCRUTON 2009: 191.

past, present and future are fundamental to the Tory love of country, and the homes we build within it. Part of settling down is protecting our environment and a disposition to accord and to recognise our environmental obligations.

FINDING THE OLD WAYS FORWARD⁶⁷

Burke told us that “[p]eople will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors”.⁶⁸ We need to look back at ancestors and draw on their knowledge, understanding and inspiration. We need to draw on the past for inspiration for the future and current proven environmental grievances can be addressed. As Burke put it in his *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*:

The reformer must understand the reason behind an abuse before trying to remedy it. The underlying principle may be sound, and the abuse merely a perversion; hence the necessity of caution and wisdom in reform. A spirit of reformation is never more consistent with itself than when it refuses to be rendered the means of destruction.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, like Virgil in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, our lantern is behind us, illuminating past events and societies, but we must keep moving forward into the darkness. We cannot go backwards, therefore we must use this light to assist us in drawing knowledge from the past. We can improve our society and our environment through prudent and humane use of the knowledge that we glean. Conservatives do have a proud history to draw on from establishing the Board of Agriculture Act 1889, when Lord Salisbury was Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden’s the Clean Air Act, the creation of the Department of the Environment with its first ever Secretary of State for the Environment and the “Blue Belt” in 2017.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ This subsection title has been inspired by O’HEAR 2000.

⁶⁸ BURKE 1790: 47–48.

⁶⁹ BURKE 1791: 48.

⁷⁰ See PITT 2023: 161–177.

Margaret Thatcher was right when she said, at the Conservative Party Conference in 1988, that “[n]o generation has a freehold on this earth. All we have is a life tenancy – with a full repairing lease.”⁷¹ We have to remember the terms of the *full repairing* lease. The key goal for policy in terms of the environmental issues is to ensure that externalities are directed inwards, so that the individual, or the business, or the state has to bear the cost of its own actions. Since economies depend upon social capital, so ecological obligations, the renewal of trust, responsibility, and the little platoons and sustainable family structures are paramount to the sustainability of both economy and environment. As Russell Kirk noted, “we ought to employ our techniques of efficiency in the interest of posterity, voluntarily conserving our land and our minerals and our forests and our water and our old towns and our countryside for the future partners in our contract of eternal society”.⁷²

Here are a few areas that ought to be of concern to conservative environmentalism: sustaining neighbourhoods, minimising food waste, responsible local food sourcing, effective recycling, conserving our green spaces and natural features, aiming for tree-lined streets, and “Bottle return” schemes (which I have been in favour of for almost 18 years, since visiting Finland). But most importantly we need to throw away our fast food culture and back the “fixers”. Indeed, as T. S. Eliot taught us, life is a circular journey whose end is to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.⁷³

⁷¹ THATCHER 1988.

⁷² KIRK 1989: 81.

⁷³ ELIOT 1953: lines 241–242.

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