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Comment

Blame the greens when the lights go off

Environmental campaigners will face a backlash if they do not drop their hardline attitude to energy

Nick Cohen
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In 1851, Friedrich Engels looked at Britain and concluded that its crashing economy would force the working class to unleash red revolution. 'The iron trade is totally paralysed and two of the banks which supply it with money have gone broke,' he gloated. 'There is the prospect of next spring's convulsions on the Continent coinciding with quite a nice little crisis.'

Engels's ghost is still waiting for the revolution he predicted, but as banks crash for the first time since the 19th century, his delusory assumption that recessions are good for the left persists.

I can see why people think that way, as I have myself. When markets crash, people should realise that they've wasted money on fripperies they never needed and are burdened with debts they can't clear, the argument runs. Homes and pensions they assumed to be safe shrivel in value. Jobs they had taken for granted vanish. Surely they will make a radical critique of the system which has let them down.

In practice, they don't - or most don't. Although the collective memory of the Thirties includes grainy pictures of the Jarrow march, the Great Depression didn't produce a radical upsurge. The Labour party split and Britain was ruled by the Conservative or Conservative-dominated governments of MacDonald, Baldwin and Chamberlain. Nor did economic crisis of the Seventies send Britain leftwards. Laboursplit again and Margaret Thatcher destroyed union power.

Far from being the product of hardship, the triumph of centre-left ideas from the early Nineties on coincided with low inflation and economic growth. The huge increases in public spending and the new concerns about the degradation of the environment and plight of the poor world were made possible by a benign economy. Voters need to feel secure before they can accept the altruistic arguments of the left and I think it's fair to predict that their security will soon disappear.

We need to be careful because, as ever, there are disputes among the forecasters. Harry Truman once grew so exasperated by his advisers saying 'on the other hand' that he pleaded for a 'one-armed economist'. The wildly varying predictions of their successors range from those of optimists who say Britain will merely experience a slow-down, via pessimists who say that the banking crisis makes a recession inevitable to catastrophists who predict the worst slump since the Thirties.

You can take your pick, but, tellingly, no one thinks Britain's economy will carry on as before or improve.

Whatever happens, the public sector bonanza is over. The government has spent so much it has nothing in reserve to revive the economy if the pessimists are right and hard times come. Inflation is back making energy and food dearer. In the changed circumstances, ideas that were taken for granted in the boom of the past 15 years are about to be tested. Is, for instance, today's commitment to environmentalism a luxury? Like expensive holidays and restaurant meals, will it be one of the first casualties of a recession?

There is a danger that it will because the weakness of green political ideas to date has been their failure to break out of the middle class. The majority of the population still has little or no interest in them. At the New Year, a food company called Whole Earth released the findings of a poll which found that two-thirds of respondents were baffled by the terms 'sustainable' and 'genetically modified' and almost half thought that

'macrobiotic' meant a type of bacteria - I won't sneer because I had to look it up too.

Perhaps the general confinement of green thinking to the comfortably off is unavoidable. Maybe people can only worry about the environment when they are not worried about how to make their pay last until the end of the week. It's certainly easier to live off organic food if you have a comfortable income and to recycle if you can afford a house with a garden for a compost heap. But even if the rich have greater scope to be greener than the poor, the possibility that the momentum behind the environmental movement will dissipate with a crash is exacerbated by the failure of its leaders to think hard enough about how the policies they recommend hit those in straitened circumstances.

I've heard officials with homeless charities deride Friends of the Earth for its opposition to Gordon Brown's plans for a house building programme - 'bearded nimbies' is their only printable comment. The fashion for counting 'food miles' and feeling righteous if you buy locally produced food doesn't concern itself with the question of how farmers in poor countries will be affected if consumers in rich export markets make a virtue of boycotting their products.

But the greatest scope for a backlash comes from hardline attitudes to energy. In successive weeks, Greenpeace has denounced proposals for new coal-fired power stations and a new generation of nuclear power plants. It may be true that clean-coal technology is a long way off, but whatever other complaints can be made about it, nuclear power is an alternative to fossil fuels and honest greens are hard-headed enough to admit it. James Lovelock, the greatest environmentalist of our time, describes it as 'the one safe, available, energy source' and despairs at the green movement's 'irrational' objections.

Those suffering - and in some cases dying - this winter because they can't afford to heat their homes may not care about the technical arguments. They are more likely to see the green movement as their enemy if every time a new source of power is proposed an environmentalist pops up to explain why it can't be built.

At its best, green politics isn't food faddery or yet another means for the refined middle class to distinguish itself from the masses, but altruism in action. It urges us to make sacrifices now so that future generations will not have to endure the consequences of global warming. Although they may not realise it, the greens need economic growth because the lesson of history is that when growth goes, altruism goes with it.

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