

# ENVIRONMENTALISM & THE ENHANCEMENT OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

By Dr Jean-Paul Gagnon

**T**he argument that politics, or democracy more specifically, has been bolstered by the rise of environmental concerns from the 1960s onwards, is not novel herein. Although most commentators place the rise of environmentalism as a political concern starting in 1962 with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the heritage of environmental activism across numerous histories significantly predates Carson's work. One example that this particular discourse usually leaves out is the activism of indigenous peoples who have, depending on which case we look to, been public advocates for the care of natural environments. An arbitrarily chosen case comes from Brian Schofield's book entitled *Selling Your Father's Bones*. In this work about the Nimi'ipuu (or Nez Percé/e) Nation which

used to call parts of what are now the illegitimate territories of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming home, we find the individual Hinmahtooyahlatkekt (colloquially known as Young Joseph or more problematically as Chief Joseph). He campaigned in the late 1800s and very early 1900s (died in 1904) for the preservation of natural environments for which the Nimi'ipuu and other close-by Nations carefully tended for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

But, a counter-argument to that point is that the *mainstreaming* of environmental activism in what is now known as North America and Europe for example did not pick up the attention it now has until popular works like *Silent Spring* began affecting broader publics. I, however, do reason that sustained indigenous and non-indigenous environmental activism



over generations before 1962 have greatly helped in this regard. Wherever its origins have sprung – environmental activism is now undeniably a global political movement. And this movement, or concern with environments (places of ‘wilderness’, ‘wildlife’, ‘nature’, and so on), has most probably driven a large swathe of individuals into this kind of political and democratic participation.

individuals across boundaries have been targeting large international organization summits with strikingly similar demands: clean air, clean water, bigger forests, protected marine environments, food sovereignty, anti-genetically modified foods and animals, fair trade, organic foods, and so forth. The fact that diverse individuals around the world and from different languages have been making



The contribution to this special issue that I would like to make in this article is an analytic presentation of how the movement of individuals concerned with the environment has been in certain cases manifesting politically. It is hoped that this evidence will go some way to clarify the sweeping heuristic argument that environmentalism equals a more numerical, engaged, or active citizenry, public, or society.

### **Protesting International Organization Summits**

From international relations, political philosophy, and environmental sciences for example, we come to see that

these similar demands during international summits is important as that is a recent phenomenon.

The Battle in Seattle (1999 protest of the WTO), the trouble in Toronto (2010 protest of the G20), the rumble in Rio (2012 protest of the G20), the shaking of Chicago (2012 protest of the G8), the grumblings of Greece or the gratings of Germans (in reference to IMF, World Bank and WTO meetings) are just a few of the more colourful examples.

We can see the fragile Leviathan composed of a pluralism of hard to define *demos* (or multiple ill-defined demos) coming, possibly unwarily, to protest



together against the hunting of wales or of baby seals for example. Japan and Canada have both been the target of a union of very diverse individuals from around the world protesting against the killings of these animals. We might extend this point to the protest of vegetarians against the eating of meat or animal products. Then again, the same argument can be made about transnational interventions by individuals for humanistic purposes as was witnessed during the flotilla for the relief of Palestinians. Are humanistic concerns separate to environmental ones?

### **Environmentalism as a Political Topic through Scales of Government**

Should we look to local, local-regional, state or provincial or territory, confederate or federal, regional (international), continental, intercontinental, and or global systems of government and or governance, the presence of environmental concerns is often a constant. At the local level, from what is now known as South America to the confusingly defined mainland China to the illegitimately named Australia, individuals have been expressing their discontent and or concern over the

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environment. Villagers in the south of mainland China have, for example, been against release of industrial pollutants into nearby water sources: these are blamed for cancer clusters in certain rural areas. In another example, individuals in and or around the Greater Toronto Area in Canada had recently lobbied government to ban the use of chemical herbicides and pesticides: these were blamed for adverse health effects in humans, family pets, and the death or mutation of fauna and flora in sensitive ecological habitats.

At the local-regional level we can see that individuals in Montana or Tasmania are talking with, or shouting at, each other over whether urban farmland or forests facing subdivision development should be preserved as natural habitats; we can see that there are debates at that level of government over whether certain agricultural domains should be returned to the wild (such as the re-flooding of the marshlands in or around *Veta La Palma* just an hour and a half by car south-south west from Seville, Spain); and over whether 'natural corridors' should be developed so as to permit deer, Moose, elk, or other animals to traverse territory without risk of being hit by a vehicle, killed in a dam, or stressed to death by the harassment of a family pet.

Should we turn to state, provincial, or territorial politics, the debates over environmentalism grow larger in scale. The intensity, if not ferocity of the debates, however, are I think vigorous at all levels of government or governance. I've seen individuals argue passionately about the missing frogs of spring in Torontonians suburbs which were, as it was argued, killed by pesticides. This



passion matched if not surpassed that of peoples that I've seen arguing against international oil or gas pipelines or giant multinational ocean-based oil rigs.

Some examples from this level of government include the contentious issue of the Alberta tar sands in Canada (to keep sourcing or to stop sourcing oil seems to be the main question); the construction of an international port of call for large cruise ships in the south of Queensland, Australia, which could adversely affect the local marine environments; and the resistance of peoples living in the arbitrarily determined Pará region of Brazil to the Belo Monte or Kararaô Dam.

At the level of confederation, federation, union-state, nation-state, or other cognate identifier, there are of course many well-known environmental debates. The type of environmental concern differs from place to place, but their presence in union-state level politics remains. In Canada, the USA, Australia, Japan, mainland China, and Russia, for example, are the country-wide concerns over what to do with 'spent' nuclear material; in

Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama, and Honduras are concerns over the rate of deforestation (so too in many central African countries); in Mexico, France, and South Africa there are concerns over agricultural and or industrial effluents running off into major river systems.

These types of concerns continue to scale upwards at ever 'higher' levels of government or governance. In regional (international) and continental governing systems (think ASEAN, the European Union or the African Union) individuals are protesting against genetically modified food crops; against the unsustainability of large-scale agriculture or fishing; against the harvesting of timber from 'virgin forests' (IKEA was recently lambasted for this shameful practice); against dumping toxic wastes in poorer countries and so forth. This trend continues through to global politics: indeed, many of the concerns expressed at the level of the EU or African Union are global concerns. Food sovereignty and equity; the protection of biodiversity; panic over species endangerment; concerns about overpopulation; and debates around

*The construction of the Belo Monte Dam in the amazon region of Brazil.*



urban pollution are but a few examples on the agenda. A good place to mine for details of such concerns are the minutes from the meetings of the United Nations General Assembly or the UNESCO General Assembly – in both lie the potential to conduct text-based longitudinal analyses of environmental discourse at the level of global governance.

From this one heuristic dimension, of looking to levels of government for the existence and nature of environmental concerns we can easily see that individuals throughout the world are politically engaged on environmental issues. Of course, in order to try to determine whether more individuals today are politically engaged over the environment than they were ten or twenty years ago, that would in part require a major trans-national longitudinal study. That is naturally beyond the scope of this article – but it is hoped that my words might go some way to furthering research of that type.

#### **Environmental Politics as Loci for Debate, Participation, and Awareness**

As can be read in other articles within this special issue, such as those by Stephen Elstub, Nicole Curato, Nicholas Rose, or Prabhat Datta, environmental politics seems to be a place wherein debate, participation, and awareness of ‘facts’ is necessary. This might have to do with the complexity of even the smallest (in scale) environmental questions. For example, is chemical pesticide X the actual cause of reptilian or amphibian mortality in the estuary next to suburb Y? A question of such simplicity does, under current

scientific methods, often take years to answer. Now consider the even more complex question of whether automotive exhaust is responsible for the acidification of agricultural topsoils near major urban centres. Or what the effect of building a major international cruise ship port is going to have on nearby marine ecosystems?

Individuals need to be informed about how ‘facts’ are built by scientists, how these ‘facts’ are used by their opponents, how scientific arguments are misconstrued by politicians or reporters, and how the data that scientists rely on can be ‘fudged’ by corporations under, for example, investigation regarding ecosystem poisoning.

Individuals then also need to engage with each other on two important fronts: solutions to problems and normative visions for the future. One good example is whether or not to build a subdivision over a plot of forest bordering an existing subdivision. “People need places to live and should have rights to homes like everyone else” is an argument waged against “we have enough homes and should be looking to vertical living” and “the forest needs a voice as it is not heard in this debate.” Therein is already the problem of deciding who gets a home; how the forest is to be represented; what vertical living means; and the power dialectic between affected individuals, business interests, and governmental interests. Just in this one example is already the clear evidence that long-term participation, dialogue, debate, discussion, and or deliberation are required by informed citizens to come to some resolution of environmental concerns. Therein is also the need to



formulate some basic threshold in debate or deliberation: we must move on from simply 'doing deliberation' to 'doing impressive deliberation' as argued by Stephen Elstub in an interview forthcoming for publication by the *Journal of Democratic Theory*.

There is too the argument that environmental politics has been drawing scientists much more into the public sphere. During the Cold War we could argue that the majority of 'public scientists' were nuclear experts. What we have today is a Green War that includes nuclear experts, but that also includes experts on seas, forests, skies, depths, food, health, sustainability, resource management, and so on. It is an explosion of experts into the public realm which might be a phenomenon tenuously labelled as the 'politicization of science'. (On the other side of things is the argument that scientists are forced to research on 'political' topics as this is where their funding will mostly come from).

### **Conclusion**

Although the analytics of this article are heuristic-based, and certainly lacking in robust empirical evidence, there is value in this kind of opinion presentation. As Ulrich Beck argued at the end of his Hobhouse Memorial Lecture (15 February, 2006, London School of Economics), heuristic arguments act like street lamps. They shine a cone of light over a part of dark streetscape to reveal often interesting things for us to see. Now, these cones of light certainly might not help us to find the lost wallet we're searching for (a metaphor for failing to answer a specific practical research question), but then again, we

might just find a hundred dollar bill lying about.

So although I cannot at this time prove that environmentalism has enhanced the public sphere and the use of democratic politics the world over, that was not the intent of this article. What I have meant to do here is, through my own opinions, present an analysis showing that environmentalism surely seems to have achieved the latter. Individuals throughout the world appear, hopefully not by crafty illusion, to be far more engaged politically and through democratic mechanisms, than ever before which I think is thanks to concerns over the environment.

Nevertheless, there is certainly scope to argue whether the environment is the actual catalyst for this political reaction. I think it is one of them. One catalyst bolstered by others like the internet, mobile communication devices, gross inequalities, violence, and governmental corruption among many others 'fire-starters'. Some catalysts facilitate an individual's ability to communicate. Some pester and annoy an individual until throwing her arms up in frustration and charging the irritant is the temporary reaction. Other catalysts can infuriate, inspire, or make curious an individual to so great an extent that the self in question decides to shift their personal paradigm towards more active political participation.

### **Note:**

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