

“green alliance...

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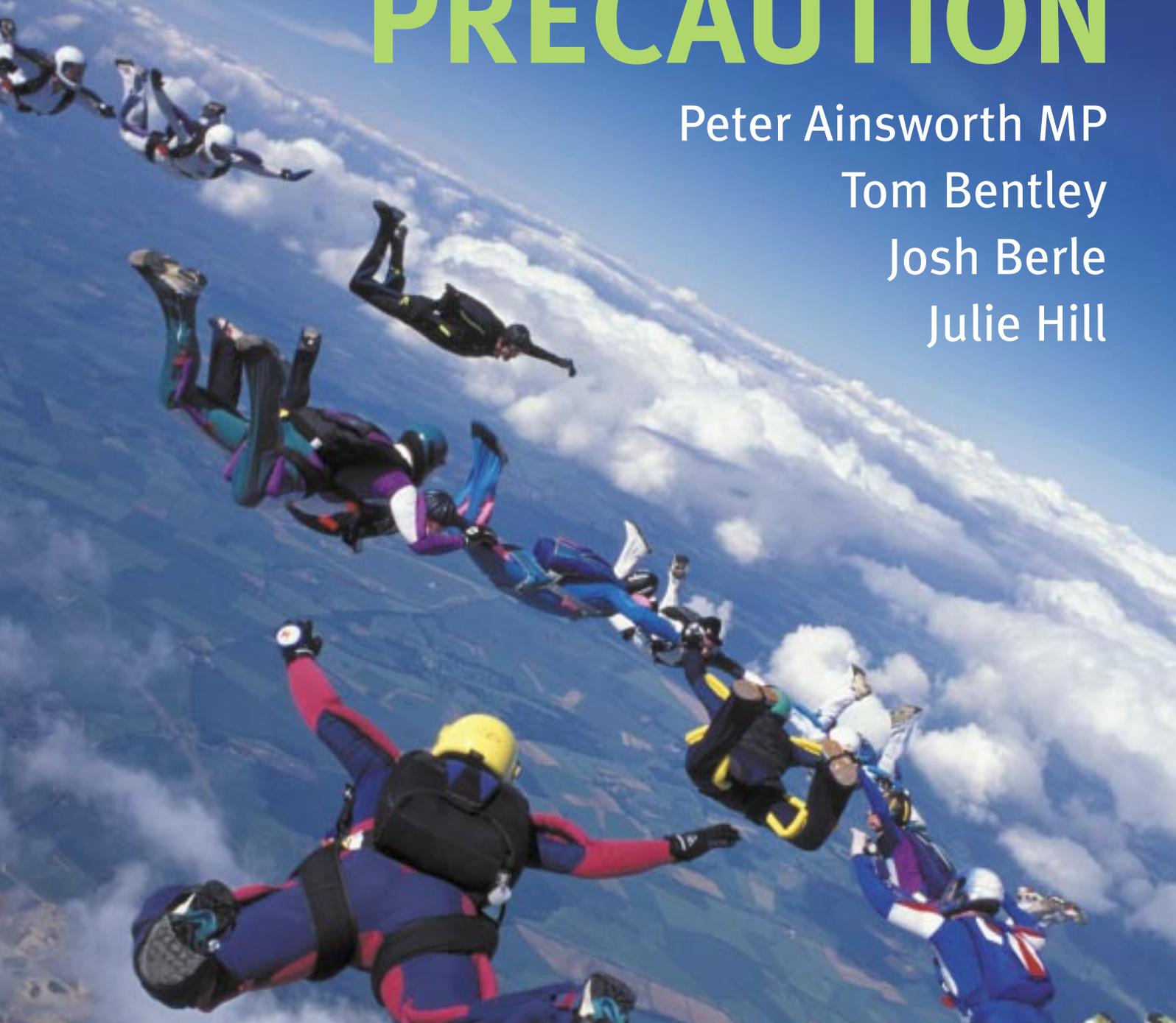
# PEOPLE, POLICY, PRECAUTION

Peter Ainsworth MP

Tom Bentley

Josh Berle

Julie Hill



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are you doing **your bit?**

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The views of contributors are not necessarily those of Green Alliance.

# comment

Rebecca Willis,  
Director,  
Green Alliance



Photograph by Malcolm Crowthers

The need to re-engage people in politics and policy-making has been stated so often that it has almost become a cliché. Low election turnouts, lack of trust in government and cynicism about government's inability to deliver change are all symptomatic of a dysfunctional relationship between policy-makers and the public. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in issues characterised by risk or scientific uncertainty – genetic modification; mobile phones; even the MMR vaccine. The greater the government reassurance, the less the public trust.

This edition of *Inside Track* focuses on the relationship between people and policy, and suggests ways forward for building trust and encouraging public involvement in environmental decision-making. Peter Ainsworth MP bemoans the “distance which has grown up between government and the rest of us”, saying that “formal consultations come too late and are largely cosmetic”. Tom Bentley of Demos argues that policy-makers need to let go, moving away from a centralised, top-down approach to policy and encouraging complexity, through systems of self-governance.

Other articles describe efforts made to put the theory of public involvement into practice - the Federation of the Electronics Industry's 'ten commitments' to public involvement in mobile phone issues, and the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission's work on stimulating a public debate about biotechnology. Green Alliance's report, *Precaution in Practice*, sets out the challenges of responding to risk and scientific uncertainty, and the article on page 3 give a synopsis of our findings.

As these articles show, there is a growing understanding of the need for a two-way relationship between people and policy, and a greater willingness to experiment with ways to achieve this. Without such progress, environmental policy – from climate change to chemicals – will be an insurmountable challenge.

# Precaution in practice

Potential environment and health risks have caused a stir in public emotions that might be almost enviable in this age of political apathy. We've witnessed public outcry on issues such as GM, mobile phones, masts and MMR, which suggests that the policy-making system is letting us down. It is evident that issues relating to risk and scientific uncertainty demand an approach to decision-making that is robust and builds confidence.

What is needed is a process of decision-making that enables views and values to be incorporated at the earliest opportunity. This is not to say that we should reject 'sound science' but that there is a need for additional forms of knowledge and public involvement in decision-making. There is a need to listen and learn.

Green Alliance has worked on issues of scientific uncertainty for a number of years. Our latest report, *Precaution in Practice*, examines how the precautionary principle has been used in decisions on issues where there is scientific uncertainty. The precautionary principle is a cornerstone of environmental policy, and is enshrined in policy and legislation. *Precaution in Practice* looks at how the principle is actually viewed and used by government, business and NGOs.

In the report we set out a process for better decision-making under scientific uncertainty, based on consensus between the stakeholders. The process emphasises the need for genuine stakeholder and public involvement, and stresses that precaution is part of, not instead of, good science. In addition, openness and transparency are central.

The report makes a number of recommendations to each of the groups as to how they should use precaution to produce more effective decisions. Green Alliance recommends that business makes broader use of its consumer panels to ask wider questions about views and values, thereby informing innovation strategies. We also call for stakeholder bodies and processes for public involvement to be given a central role in policy-making in government.

Upcoming issues including the end of the field trials of genetically modified crops and the regulation of bioaccumulative chemicals will provide a test-bed for precaution. Policy-makers will need to follow a precautionary process, and make decisions in a transparent, inclusive way. In this way, a precautionary process can strengthen decision-making under scientific uncertainty, and produce better outcomes for human health and the environment.

*Precaution In Practice: How government, business and NGOs use the precautionary principle* is available from Green Alliance.

# Green Alliance gives boost to renewables

A new policy measure to promote renewable energy, the renewables obligation, was launched by the Government in April, following recommendations put forward by Green Alliance. The obligation requires all electricity suppliers to buy an increasing proportion of their electricity from renewable sources, rising to ten percent by 2010, but it also allows suppliers to meet this obligation through trading in a market for renewable energy certificates.

This model is based on a proposal put forward by Green Alliance in our 1999 report, *New Policies for Renewable Energy*. Through a process of consultation and discussion with industry, NGOs and government, Green Alliance developed and promoted a package of policy measures to support renewable energy, including the renewables obligation, long-term support for research and development, and a range of supporting measures.

*For further details of Green Alliance's work on energy policy please contact Rebecca Willis.*

# It must be summer...

In spite of the weather, Green Alliance is once again defiantly holding a summer reception. It is on the evening of 16 July at the Arts Club, London. Our special guest this year is Charles Clarke MP and the event is being sponsored by United Utilities. This is an informal reception that we use to introduce new contacts to Green Alliance. If you have not received an invitation and would like to come, please contact Hilary Brennan at Green Alliance, [hbrennan@green-alliance.org.uk](mailto:hbrennan@green-alliance.org.uk). Also, if you know someone who should know Green Alliance, give Hilary their details and we will send them an invitation.

# Green Alliance's year ahead

April is the start of the new year for Green Alliance. Here we outline our plans for 2002-03.

## Making environment a central political issue

### Policies that deliver

Green Alliance works to encourage innovative Government policy that delivers real environmental improvement. Last year we homed in on the Treasury's agenda, offering a green perspective on tax and spending decisions. This year, we'll be developing this work, liaising between the Treasury and environmental NGOs to make the case for green taxes.

Robust opposition is an essential spur to good government policy, so we are continuing our work with both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats on their environment policies.

We are also concentrating on building more progressive coalitions with NGOs, business and government, particularly by developing a stronger strategic alliance of the major environmental groups.

### New EU focus

Europe is a key driver of UK environment legislation. Green Alliance chairs the UK branch of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), which has 130 NGO members across Europe. Through EEB meetings with the UK environment minister we help to promote UK interests to the EU environment council.

To develop understanding and awareness of EU issues amongst UK environmental groups our new European work focuses on improving capacity in this area, especially amongst smaller environmental organisations. Tackling this is vital to ensuring proper NGO engagement with the EU agenda.

## Integrating environment into public policy and decision-making

### Bright ideas for waste

Last year we successfully encouraged the UK waste management industry to commit to standards on environmental reporting (*Inside Track - issue 1*). This year we have launched a project to bring some new ideas to the waste policy debate. Through analysis of successful waste policy packages used elsewhere in the world, like Denmark, the Netherlands, California and Sweden, we will be proposing creative new policies for the UK.

### Moving from products to services

If a paint company were to charge for a completed paint job rather than for pots of paint, their incentive would be to reduce rather than increase the amount of paint supplied. Such a transformation from product to service-based enterprise has great potential to reduce resource use and environmental impact. Under our *Bright Green Economy* work this year we are running a project, involving a wide range of groups in researching and promoting the service model.

## Stimulating new thinking and advancing the environmental agenda into new areas

### New agendas

Introducing a fresh perspective on environmental policy, this programme of work has previously stimulated debate on Europe, the new economy, and social inclusion and the environment. Our fourth pamphlet in the series *Brand Green: Mainstream or forever niche?* by marketing guru Wendy Gordon, looks at how to change consumer habits on a wider scale in favour of green products (debate upcoming in *Inside Track - issue 3*).

We now want to develop new areas of work in the *new agendas* programme, including the relevance of the environment to the health debate; the public services agenda; and urban planning and design.

### Rapid response

In a matter of days, hard-won progress on environmental policy can be undone. Issues such as the October 2000 fuel tax protests have the potential to significantly damage progress on environmental policy. Following the protests, the Government is now less willing to consider further environmental taxation or progressive transport policies. Better co-ordination of the NGO response at the time may have resulted in less damage.

This new workstream aims to get the environmental voice heard when issues that impact on the environment are raised on the political or media agenda. It will involve fast reaction and the co-ordination of environmental views, for which we are already well-known. We think that a strong focus on this aspect of our work will ensure that we can respond quickly and decisively, and will reap dividends over the coming year.

### Membership and communications

The new look *Inside Track* is just one of the ways we are improving our communication along with website and database development. This year we want to broaden our audience and increase membership, drawing in more people, professions and businesses, especially smaller enterprises, to support our mission. Throughout the year we will be holding a series of interesting and stimulating meetings and debates, in which we hope to involve many of you.

We welcome your views and contribution to this work.

## Progress towards sustainability?

### From Gothenburg to Barcelona- an assessment one year on

Environmentalists had due cause to celebrate at the European Union's annual summit in Gothenburg in June 2001. Success had been achieved with a commitment to sustainable development from the European Union, demonstrated by the addition of an environmental dimension to the existing economic and social objectives of the EU sustainable development strategy.

The first eagerly awaited European Commission report assessing progress towards meeting the three aims of the EU sustainable development strategy was however a disappointment. Produced in January 2002, it fell far short of expectations, focusing almost exclusively on economic priorities, reinforcing NGO fears that integrating environmental into the existing economic and social objectives would result in sidelining the environment.

The European Environment Bureau, together with the European Trade Union Confederation and the Platform of Social NGOs, brought members together in Barcelona in March to discuss their common interest in sustainable development and express their concerns regarding the Commission's report. The conference, which was held shortly before the EU Barcelona summit, discussed a joint declaration by the three groups, stressing the need for improvements to be made in subsequent Commission reports.

In its defence the Commission has argued that the later addition of the environmental pillar has left insufficient time to really demonstrate the integration of the environment in this first progress report and improvements can be expected in Spring 2003. The Gothenburg commitment to add the environmental dimension to the sustainable development strategy must be demonstrated in this next report, as environmentalists are unlikely to give the Commission the benefit of the doubt for a second year running.

*For further information on the European Environmental Bureau please contact Charlotte Marples.*

# Policy-making through partnership

## Peter Ainsworth MP sets out his vision for the role of government in environmental decision-making

This year's fiasco over the recycling of fridges and freezers offers a prime example of how not to introduce environmental legislation. Lack of forward planning has created mountains of dumped fridges, huge costs to local authorities and the prospect of unwanted units being carted across Europe for disposal; all in the name of saving the environment. The inspiration behind many EU environment directives may be sound, but the law of unexpected consequences lies in wait for unwary politicians who fail to think things through.

Whatever the wider public perception of the EU, few people now doubt that many environmental issues are best handled through international cooperation. Acid rain taught us all that. But I hope that we have also learned that the one-size-fits-all approach to EU regulations has had its day. This means firstly that we need the Government to be actively engaged in shaping Commission proposals so that they meet the national interest as well as the needs of the environment; and secondly, that when EU initiatives turn into domestic regulations, they work. The way the Nitrates Directive, for example, looks set to be implemented is an object lesson in how to disadvantage a struggling industry without doing anything worthwhile for the environment.

A distance has grown up between government and its ever-present officials, and the rest of us who have to live with the consequences of their decisions. It is a frequent complaint that formal consultations come too late and are largely cosmetic. We need to re-invent the way that we go about environmental legislation, and that means changing the mind-set of politicians.

The tendency of the Government to behave as though it always knows best is out of date and increasingly counter-productive. Too many sticks and not enough carrots is a prescription for bolshy acquiescence rather than an enthusiastic willingness to see good environmental practice as good business.

It is indicative of Government failure to take business with them in the search for an environmentally sustainable future that the challenge set by the Prime Minister to the top 350 companies in the UK to publish annual environmental reports by the end of 2001 was only taken up by 79 businesses.

Clearly there cannot be a laissez-faire attitude to the environment, but present policies have led to a dramatic increase in the part that the Government plays in our economy; taxes, grants, penalties, targets, subsidies and bureaucratic controls have created a tangled bundle of high compliance costs and complex rules. It is vital that government actively engages with business and consumers when developing policy. This would enable them to deliver a genuinely joined-up approach to policy issues.

In some areas the opposite is occurring and government infrastructure is becoming less inclusive and less flexible. The Government's Planning Green Paper suggests that ninety per cent of planning decisions will be decided by officers, rather than elected councillors, and there are disturbing plans to curtail local input into major infrastructure proposals. In addition the Government's centralised housing forecasts will require up to two million dwellings to be built on



greenfield land over the next two decades, irrespective of local wishes. The neutering of local government poses a direct threat to the environment.

The Government's job is to ensure proper consultation to reach simple, effective and targeted legislation. Rigid and complex rules alienate industry and communities and give environmental protection a bad name. We need to establish a more mature relationship between government and industry; one which avoids arbitrary intervention but is based instead on recognition of mutual needs, abilities and responsibilities. Only then will attitudes and perceptions towards environmental legislation change and it will start to be seen as an integral part of business and community life, an opportunity rather than a hindrance and an imposition.

From the science of climate change to litter on the street and in our parks, the environment matters to everybody. Policies to create a sustainable future are not incompatible with economic prosperity or individual choice. Everybody has a responsibility to protect and conserve their environment but we need a coherently planned and ambitious framework which makes it easier for us all to do what we know to be right. The proper role of government and politicians, as Iain Duncan-Smith has said 'is about giving purpose and direction to what people are prepared to do for free'.

# Mobile masts: industry's way forward

Josh Berle, from the Federation of the Electronics Industry, explains how his sector has taken steps to involve the public with the environmental decision-making process and how he hopes this will mean the public are well informed of potential risks and benefits.

The huge growth in the impact of one of our most recognisable technological icons – the mobile phone – has been matched by the growth of an equally recognisable local environmental issue – the mobile phone mast.

In the post-BSE world, public concerns about health and environmental risks are big news, especially where the cause is something common or garden – like food or mobile phones. But what can be done to address concerns and reassure a jaundiced public that has learned not to trust the advice of government and the claims of industry?

Indeed, on the mobile mast issue, this challenge is particularly acute. For example, few appreciate that their handsets won't work without masts being nearby. Many perceive more risk from masts than handsets. The recent Stewart report concludes that the balance of evidence to date suggests no adverse health risks due to either masts or handsets.

The planning system has taken the brunt of most people's criticisms for appearing to ignore local concerns. The problem here is that the planning system is not designed as a forum for debate about possible health risks, and is obliged to take its cue from the kind of science-based advice provided by the Stewart report. So what's the best way forward? The mobile phone operators believe the answer lies in more up-front contact with local people to address directly people's concerns and misconceptions, and to respond where the planning system can't.

The operators are implementing ten commitments to best practice in network roll out developed in consultation with a variety of local community stakeholders to ensure they are workable on the ground.

Under the commitments, the operators will improve their assessment of the potential sensitivity of a possible mast location, and implement consultation activities in the community, should the location be judged to require it and the operator decides not to look elsewhere.

Local planning officers will be provided with more strategic information on network development plans across their locale and their views sought prior to lodging specific applications. To further reassure the public, the operators have signed a new agreement amongst themselves to encourage more site sharing and ensure progress on sharing is made public.

The operators believe this new approach will ensure local people are better informed and have a better opportunity to voice their concerns. Local councils at all levels also have an important role to play, ensuring the right balance is struck between access to world-class mobile services and environmental responsibility.

*If you have any comments or questions, please call the Federation of the Electronics Industry on 020 7331 2000 or visit their website at [www.fei.org.uk](http://www.fei.org.uk).*

## The mobile phone operators' ten commitments

- to develop, with other stakeholders, clear standards and procedures to deliver significantly improved consultation with local communities
- to participate in obligatory pre-rollout and pre-application consultation with local planning authorities
- to publish clear, transparent and accountable criteria and cross-industry agreement on site sharing, against which progress will be published regularly
- to establish professional development workshops on technological developments within telecommunications for local authority officers and elected members
- to deliver, with the Government, a database of information available to the public on radio base stations
- to assess all radio base stations for international compliance for public exposure, and produce a programme for international compliance for all radio base stations as recommended by the Stewart group
- to provide, as part of planning applications for radio base stations, a certification of compliance with ICNIRP public exposure guidelines
- to provide specific staff resources to respond to complaints and enquiries about radio base stations, within ten working days
- to begin financially supporting the Government's independent scientific research programme on mobile communications health issues
- to develop standard supporting documentation for all planning submissions whether full planning or prior approval



# Scanning the horizon

Julie Hill, vice-chair of the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission, outlines their approach to public involvement and precaution.

It's a feature of everyday life – we're unsure how to tackle a problem, so we ask around. Some people's advice is more credible than others, depending on what we know about their experience and predilections, but often there is enough of a common thread to guide our actions.

Why should environmental problems be any different? Environmental decision-making often involves dealing with considerable scientific uncertainty. Uncertainty militates for precaution. Precaution militates for trying to think ahead, exploring all the options, asking a wide range of people with relevant experience what they think, and getting ownership of what are likely to be tricky decisions. Green Alliance has been examining the precautionary principle as a common-sense

approach to policy-making( see page 3).

Translating common-sense into institutional frameworks for decision-making is the challenge of our age. We live in a democracy, but that doesn't seem to be enough for those who demand greater public participation in decisions, and trust is a commodity in short supply. At the same time, for many people, life is too short to boil an egg, let alone take part in complex discussions about environmental risk and precaution. So bodies like the AEBC (Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission) face an uphill task.

If an element of the precautionary process is looking ahead and trying to anticipate problems, the AEBC has to scan the horizon. The Commission formulated its initial

work plan through a collective intuition of what the members thought was important, at that moment and in the relatively near future. It chose:

- An examination of the Government's controversial Field Scale Evaluations (FSEs) of GM crops to case study the way in which decisions were being made about the technology. The report on the Farm Scale Evaluations<sup>i</sup> was published last year.
- An enquiry into biotechnology and animals, focusing on the adequacy of the regulatory system in the face of the complex issues raised by extending the technology from the plant to the animal kingdom.
- Liability, since a possible lack of redress for any damage resulting

## The Agriculture and Biotechnology Commission AEBC

The AEBC was created by Government in the wake of the public outcry about genetically modified (GM) food and crops. Members are appointed in a personal capacity but are drawn from a wide range of interest groups including NGOs, business, the scientific community, academia, the church, the media and the law. Its remit is to provide the Government with independent strategic advice on developments in biotechnology (of which GM is but a sub-set) and their implications for agriculture and environment. It is also an explicit part of the remit to 'involve and consult stakeholders and the public on a regular basis'. When she launched the AEBC in June 2000, Mo Mowlam described it as 'the voice of people' on biotechnology. GM is a policy area where scientific uncertainties abound, where expert scientific advice has been particularly controversial, and where there is public scepticism about GM not just because of potential environment risks, but because of a questioning of the future of agriculture as a whole. AEBC is truly at the sharp end of precaution.

from biotechnology seemed to be an important facet of people's concerns.

- Similarly, consumer choice. Addressing how GM and other forms of agriculture such as organic can co-exist, and how any incompatibility between them might affect what people could buy.

All these were, or were rapidly becoming, pressing issues. However, from the outset there was a sense that the AEBC should try to look further ahead. Over a year ago the AEBC started its horizon scanning work. The exercise, which has included trying to stimulate debate around hypothetical futures, has yielded a mass of technical information, commentary and healthy controversy.

The Commission has cast far and wide for reported lines of research and the horizon-scan currently lists around 150 separate applications of biotechnology. It is likely there are more. They are supplemented by a series of commentaries on the possible risks and benefits involved in the major types of development, and are put into a wider agricultural and social context using the views of those responding to a paper on alternative futures.

The first thing that strikes anyone flicking through the table of technological developments is the diversity of applications: herbicide tolerance; insect resistance; disease resistance; drought resistance; frost resistance; plants engineered to alter their eating or processing qualities; plants engineered to produce alternative chemical feedstocks for industry; plants producing vaccines; forest trees modified to make their management easier and to grow faster; new types of grasses for lawns and golf courses; fish that grow faster; insects modified to try to stop them carrying lethal

diseases like malaria; plants and microbes that take pollutants out of soil – and more.

What should society at large make of these ideas? It has proved extremely difficult to predict how fast any of these developments might progress from lab bench to field scale, if at all. Nonetheless, for the Commission, amassing this information has consolidated thinking around some major themes that will, subject to a further public consultation exercise, become the basis of the future work plan<sup>ii</sup>.

**“We urgently need a system for assessing the relative sustainability of all new crop varieties and systems within which they are grown, not just for GMOs.”**

One theme is around who drives biotechnology research and development. There are relatively few companies worldwide with the resources to turn the gleam in a biotechnologist's eye into a commercial proposition. At the same time, there has been a decline in publicly-funded plant breeding research - the UK has virtually none.

What does this mean in terms of priorities for research? Is it possible to bring together private and public research goals towards a common theme of sustainable agriculture? These are questions that the AEBC might fruitfully examine.

One of the most ambitious ideas is for the Commission to undertake a comparison of the environmental 'footprint' of different agricultural

management regimes. Whether a new plant variety is GM or not, what will make the most difference to the environment is the way it is managed in the field. How much pesticide, fertiliser and water it needs? How much ploughing and soil damage is involved? Whether it is allowed to exchange genes with neighbouring plants, amongst other factors. We were told by respondents that we urgently need a system for assessing the relative sustainability of all new crop varieties and systems within which they are grown, not just for GMOs.

None of these themes can be pursued without engaging a wide range of opinion and expertise, and among the public at large, not just the usual suspects in the interest groups.

This is a thing easier said than done. The AEBC is facing its biggest challenge yet on this ground. By the time you read this, the Government will have decided whether to take the AEBC's advice on how to conduct a public debate around the commercialisation of GM crops.

Agreeing an approach among the diverse members of the Commission will be a challenge in itself, but for the Government not to give life to the ideas in some shape or form will risk rendering the 'voice of the people' tag meaningless. Precaution says look ahead; precaution says ask around. We have to try.

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<sup>i</sup> *Crops on Trial*, September 2001, available from the AEBC Secretariat on 020 7271 2131 or the web. [www.aebc.gov.uk](http://www.aebc.gov.uk)

<sup>ii</sup> The draft work plan and horizon-scanning study consultation period ends 9 July 2002, available from contacts above.

# People and government in a complex world



Tom Bentley, director of DEMOS, says that government will govern better if they are willing to let go.

The next decade presents a set of political challenges which is both compelling and dangerous. Public appetite for state intervention remains equivocal, a product of conflicting forces within and between societies. The growing force of technological, economic and social change fuels the desire for a politics which softens the edges of capitalism and enables individuals to thrive in a more open, fluid society. Interest in political issues has not waned, even where engagement with formal politics has done.

Concern about the power of corporations, the quality of public services, and the protection of the environment, remains high. New ethical dilemmas, from genetics to environmental protection, encourage demand for governments to act. Simultaneously, though, the cultural forces of individualism and consumerism continue to fragment the traditional bases of social solidarity. Trust in the efficacy and legitimacy of public institutions, including government, is still declining steadily in most countries. Last year's British Social Attitudes Survey showed that trust in government and politicians had declined again, in line with its long run trend, after a brief rise in the late 1990s.

A defining characteristic of the manifold changes facing our society is complexity. This claim is not new; it crops up regularly in the history of social thought, often in response to the disruption of technological change. However, the combination of rapid increases in the volume and complexity of formal knowledge, especially in science, and the flowering of new, network-based forms of communication and interdependence, or 'connexity', provides good reason for thinking that the current period of change is special, if not completely unprecedented.

The challenge for reformers is not just to find ways of understanding and interpreting these new forms of complexity. It is to shape it in purposeful ways. The

most important dimension of this challenge is institutional; the massive, historically rooted systems of organisation through which resources are allocated, needs met, and identities forged. Institutions are not just convenient or rational ways of organising large scale activity. They are also an expression of, and an influence on, values. Modern organisations are a response to the need for human activity to be ordered and carried out at scale. Organisations allow human purposes to be pursued in relatively ordered ways, but to thrive over time they must also be capable of reordering themselves in response to changes in their wider environment.

The agenda and central concepts of the neoliberal revolution were organised around one institution: the market. Market exchange was taken as the expression of individual sovereignty and rationality, and as the most effective way to reconcile the growing diversity and complexity of human preferences. The resurgence of modernising social democrats has shown a swing away from these purer forms of market liberalism, and back towards concern for cohesion, common resources and quality of life alongside wealth and personal freedom. It coincides with a period of wider debate in which there is a central recognition that the underpinning resources which make market exchange possible - social, cultural, environmental, institutional - may need to be deliberately and actively renewed, rather than taken for granted.

Another way of expressing this concern is that, in various spheres of society, we have become concerned again with how to cope with the collective consequences of billions of individual choices and interactions: traffic congestion, material waste, the hostility and insecurity of public spaces, the exploitation and marginalisation of casualised labour markets in which millions work, the implications for children of household restructuring and community fragmentation, the consequences for those in developing countries of personal consumption decisions. In all these cases, the challenge is the same; to find ways of coping with the indirect systemic effects of free individual choices which are not directed by any overarching form of social purpose, as

channelled through the rules and decisions of collective institutions.

For the contemporary left, reclaiming political power has meant recolonising a set of institutions, including government, which have, historically, provided countervailing power against the market through the use of a different set of organisational principles: command and control. For government, two features stand out; the formation of policy as a centrally determined objective which is then implemented in a rational and mechanistic way by setting rules and allocating resources, and the principle of vertical accountability; that final responsibility for decisions and financial allocations can be traced upwards from the point of implementation through a chain of command.

The question is, how can such institutions survive with their authority intact in an environment characterised by complexity, flux, unpredictability and diversity? How, when personal choice and consent has become an unrivalled cultural value in most industrialised societies, can such institutions create legitimacy for collective action or the imposition of rules?

The depth and range of the problem is illustrated by the number of contemporary policy debates characterised by the struggle to achieve coherence over uncontrollable complexity. How can central government write a set of contracts and regulations which enable a complex and fragmented rail industry to operate as one coherent system? How can governments get householders and firms to change their behaviour in ways which reduce carbon emissions? How can planning decisions affecting millions of citizens in different ways be made and coordinated in ways that reconcile their competing interests? How can legal regimes for intellectual property be developed to govern properly the knowledge of genetic code?

Full answers to these questions are beyond any one account. But there is one central implication which is clear. Clinging to command and control as a method of social intervention and a defence of the legitimacy of collective action in such an environment is a self-defeating strategy. The challenge is to recreate public institutions and governance regimes as open, porous and decentred systems which can thrive on diversity, adapt to radical innovation and still maintain coherent purpose and progress. To reanimate communities of

interest and coalitions for change, government needs to define the right purposes and build shared commitment to them, rather than maintaining exclusive control of the goal-setting process and the terms of reference within which debate is conducted.

The search for underlying organisational principles in complex, decentred systems where change is driven by diverse forces and causes unpredictable outcomes, is common to disciplines as diverse as earth sciences and ecology, computer science and population studies. Alongside the tendency towards systematic adaptation, another feature stands out; the impulse of many natural and human systems towards self-organisation. Perhaps the clearest illustration is James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which suggests that all life on earth is part of a single, indivisible, self-regulating system acting to preserve the conditions which make life possible. As Mary Midgely argued in her recent Demos pamphlet, understanding human life as part of this continuum provides a basis for understanding individual obligations towards the whole without

having to frame them as external interventions in the freedom of the sovereign individual.

This kind of lateral step, from the study of emergent forms of order in nature, to the possibility that complex, uncontrollable organisational interactions might nonetheless display a form of self-sustaining order without being subject to external control from one fixed point, is beginning to be applied to

growing numbers of human and organisational problems, from traffic control to regulation to leadership. It helps to suggest that, even amidst the threat of chaos, social progress is possible. But it implies that for such progress to occur, all members of a population must be understood as active participants in its maintenance. There is little point in pretending that improvements can simply be delivered on their behalf, however energetic or inspired the policymakers might be.

The techniques of control and command must give way to a more distributed, pluralistic and self-sustaining governing logic. The prize is to create movements and systems whose momentum is unstoppable even after their original leaders have retired from the scene. The possibility of shaping such change comes at the price of giving up the attempt to control it.

<sup>i</sup> Mulgan, G, 1997, *Connexity: how to live in a connected world*, Chatto and Windus, London.

**“The challenge is to recreate public institutions and governance regimes as open, porous and decentred systems which can thrive on diversity, adapt to radical innovation and still maintain coherent purpose and progress.”**

Green Alliance is an independent charity. Its mission is **to promote sustainable development by ensuring that the environment is at the heart of decision-making.** It works with senior people in government, business and the environmental movement to encourage new ideas, dialogue and constructive solutions.

## staff

director	Rebecca Willis
programmes adviser	Julie Hill
policy co-ordinator	Charlotte Marples
senior policy officer	Ben Shaw
policy officer	Jennie Oldham
development co-ordinator	Karen Crane
Information and website manager	Rachel Butterworth
membership officer	Hilary Brennan
publications & finance officer/ GGTF assistant convenor	Sarah Flood
GGTF convenor	Paul Chambers

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# members' forum

## Your feedback

Thank you to all the members who responded to the questions about membership which we included with the last *Inside Track*. More than 70 members replied (about 17 percent of our membership), providing us with a broad spread of opinion. The results of the research will be used to help us develop the membership service and to improve the balance of information and involvement which members want from Green Alliance. The research also gives a revealing insight into why members join and what benefits are most valued which will be useful in recruiting new members.

## Suggest a member

Green Alliance membership is open to people who support our mission and the work we do. It is an impressive mix of environmental professionals, eminent business people, political players and public figures. This variety of members gives us both credibility and a large network of expertise to tap into. Membership also forms a valuable part of Green Alliance's income, providing stable core funds to enable us to continue in our unique and independent approach to the environment and politics.

We are always seeking to strengthen our membership with new recruits, and would like to invite current members to nominate potential new ones. If you know of someone who you think should be a Green Alliance member, you can nominate them by contacting our membership officer, Hilary Brennan, [hbrennan@green-alliance.org.uk](mailto:hbrennan@green-alliance.org.uk), on 020 7233 7433 or by writing to her at Green Alliance's address. Please include brief details of your nominee, together with their postal address, email address or phone number.

## New members

Green Alliance is pleased to welcome the following individual members

Ken Rushton ● Kate Nustedt ● Dr Malcolm Eames ● Greg Mason ● Richard Grahm ● Danielle Byrne ● Clare Taylor ● Judith Ryser ● Sarah Quinnell ● MT Rainey (life member).

# and finally...

Beatrice Rose has left Green Alliance after three years as Policy Officer to work on more practical conservation issues. We would like to wish her every success. Joanna Collins, who is currently completing a Forum for the Future scholarship, will be joining us in August.