

Building A New Environmentalism

James Murray argues that a new form of environmentalism represents our last best hope for tackling the looming challenges the global economy now faces

I am not a big fan of the pre-fix “neo”; it makes me think of Nazis, Marxists, and Keanu Reeves in the Matrix. As such I instinctively bristled earlier this summer upon reading [Paul Kingsnorth’s critique](#) of what he called “neo-environmentalists”, not just because of the word he chose to use, but also because he was clearly criticising me, most of the things I believe, and the views of many of the people within the green movement whom I respect.

Kingsnorth’s contention, and it is well worth reading in full, is that there is a serious hope deficit at the heart of the modern environmental movement, creating a vacuum that has been filled by so-called “neo-environmentalists”. According to Kingsnorth, these “neo-environmentalists” are unashamedly “pro-business”, subscribe to failed “Wellsian techno-optimism”, “speak the language of money and power” beloved of the neo-liberal movement, are obsessed with placing human values on nature, overly-fixated on climate change, and kidding themselves if they think they can halt or even slow the “global industrial machine” and its continued destruction of the planet.

Now, for a signed up “neo-environmentalist” such as myself it should have been easy to dismiss Kingsnorth’s attack as just another dose of understandable grumbling from an unreconstructed old school environmentalist who has fully succumbed to the defeatism embodied by his [Dark Mountain philosophy](#) and its nihilistic (although he would argue realistic) belief that attempts to “save the planet” are doomed to complete failure.

But for some reason Kingsnorth’s diagnosis of “neo-environmentalism” stayed with me, prompting me to return to the article again and again, always with the same questions: is he right? Is there a “neo-environmentalism”? And if so, what is it? Is it the convenient cover for corporate exploitation Kingsnorth alleges, or is it something altogether different, something more positive and progressive?

At the same time I have, as always, been talking to *BusinessGreen* readers from across the worlds of business, politics, and campaigning, and it has become increasingly apparent that at least the first part of Kingsnorth’s hypothesis is accurate: there is something of a crisis afflicting the traditional environmental movement.

Environmentalism in crisis

As evidenced by the recent transition of the “100 months to save the world” initiative into the “[50 months to save the world](#)” initiative, green business success stories, billions of pounds in clean tech investment, and a broadening awareness that climate change impacts are worsening are having next to no impact on global greenhouse gas emissions. After a brief Lehman Brothers-induced hiatus in 2008, global emissions are rising again – and rising fast. Moreover, while the clean tech revolution remains the biggest untold business story of our times, the impact of an economic slump that is entering its fifth year in many industrialised economies means few countries are sufficiently focused on the need to decarbonise. If the latest figures from [Bloomberg New Energy Finance](#) are accurate, clean energy investment could even fall for the first time this year.

As articulate climate scientists such as the Tyndall Centre’s Professor Kevin Anderson are increasingly willing to point out, the outlook is bleak. The chances of avoiding global average temperature increases of more than two degrees Centigrade, as agreed by the international community, have all but disappeared. Once that two degree mark is breached and natural greenhouse gas feedbacks start to kick in, all bets are off as to the scale and the severity of the climate impacts that will result. Serious voices warn that without some form of highly risky geo-engineering breakthrough the world is going to become a very hostile and unstable place over the next few decades. Add in far less high profile crises such as ocean acidification and biodiversity loss and it is easy to understand why hard-headed risk analyses undertaken by notorious environmentalists such as the US military and the global insurance industry can send a shiver down your spine. We sometimes joke in the *BusinessGreen* office that we need an official apocalypse correspondent – it’s not really a joking matter, particularly when climate change impacts are already [driving up food prices](#) and pushing millions of people around the world towards famine.

Environmentalists of all shades - be they old school eco-warriors or chief sustainability officers at multinational firms - are being forced to admit that, despite some impressive localised victories, their campaigns are not working, or at least not working quickly enough. For all the investment in cutting-edge clean technologies, the popular support of vast swathes of society, and the political rhetoric committing to urgent action, greener economic models are not cutting through into the mainstream at the pace that is required.

In short, environmentalism is in crisis. And, like all crises, it demands a different response to those that have been tried and proved wanting in the past.

A New Environmentalism?

The second part of Kingsnorth’s contention is also accurate. The primary response to this crisis has been the emergence of a form of “neo-environmentalism”, characterised by an optimistic hope that technology and innovation can help us alleviate the environmental challenges we face. Although, if we have to call it something, I much prefer the moniker “new environmentalism” – it sounds less threatening if we don’t resort to the Greek.

The problem is that the criticism of this new environmentalism put forward by Kingsnorth and other old school greens (and I include some of the more unreconstructed elements of the green NGO community in this), completely misunderstands the true nature of the movement they seek to attack.

We may subscribe to what Kingsnorth calls “techno-optimism”, but we are in no way naïve about the scale of the environmental challenges we all face. Most of the people I would characterise as New Environmentalists are actually deeply vexed about their continued optimism, clinging to it as much in hope as expectation. We are not blinding ourselves to the reality of the environmental threats we all face, it is just that we choose to tackle them in the knowledge that the odds are stacked against us rather than succumb to a sense of resignation that would fully guarantee a staggeringly tough future for civilisation and condemn billions of people to continuing poverty and near perpetual crisis.

We may see the development of green business models and technologies as the primary route towards a more sustainable economy, but we are not as dismissive of traditional green thinking and its “emphasis on limits and transforming societal values”, as Kingsnorth alleges. Much of the most interesting New Environmentalist thinking has nothing to do with technology. It is rooted in the kind of behaviour change old school environmentalists have been trying to instigate, largely unsuccessfully, for decades. We do understand essential environmental limits and want to find a new way of operating within them by re-engineering GDP and other economic indicators to eventually support a stable, closed loop economy. We want to gradually transform societal values to promote more livable, localised communities and shared, efficient consumption. Where technology is harnessed in this context it is used to fundamentally transform unsustainable business models, through dematerialisation of products or video conferencing meetings as a replacement for air travel, to name just two examples.

To suggest New Environmentalism is designed to “make people feel comfortable about their plane flights and their iPads” completely ignores how nervous some of the world’s less adaptable businesses are about the threat posed by emerging lower consumption, lower impact business models. The New Environmentalism is pro-business, but it is a very different sort of business to the business-as-usual approaches our critics assume.

Another misconception is that this New Environmentalism is blindly and enthusiastically promoting technology as some sort of panacea to the environmental crisis. There are enthusiastic cheerleaders for bleeding edge technological fixes such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, nuclear power, and at the furthest extreme geo-engineering. But the more enthusiastic they are the closer they are to being conventional techno-evangelists, rather than New Environmentalists. New Environmentalists are in no way naïve about the risks associated with these advanced technologies. We have no desire to see any of them adopted without an extremely robust evidence base and comprehensive testing and trials. Even then we remain conflicted about the potential for Rumsfeldian “unknown unknowns”, it is just that the environmental outlook is now so stark that the risk of continued inaction is almost certainly worse than the risks associated with deploying some of these new technologies in a highly controlled manner.

Similarly, we are not naïve about the dubious track record of many businesses, including many of

those that are now leading the development of the green economy. Businesses have been guilty of many of the atrocities old school environmentalists have accused them of. There can be no justification for the short-sighted self-interest of many corporations and the catastrophic environmental damage they have caused.

But you have to see their achievements in the whole, neither underplaying the harm that has been done, nor belittling the staggering technological and social achievements of the past two centuries. No one is pretending that the current capitalist system is perfect, far from it. But businesses have been one of the primary crucibles for innovation and the improvements in quality of life and general well-being that have come with it. There is worrying evidence to suggest the [pace of innovation has stalled in recent decades](#) with only a handful of industries delivering game-changing new technologies, while too many firms focus on incremental improvements. The internal combustion engine and the energy grid, for example, are recognisably much the same today as they were 100 years ago, while the past 20 years has failed to emulate the widespread technological changes that dominated the first half of the 20th Century. But as the great industrial, consumer, and digital revolutions have proven in the past, businesses are capable of developing and deploying new technologies at a breakneck pace when conditions are right. The key question for critics of New Environmentalism is where else is the innovation going to come from to tackle environmental challenges and protect the poorest and most vulnerable in our societies from the consequences of our mistakes over the past 150 years, if not from businesses?

Ultimately, businesses are no more a homogenous community than any other human grouping. They are nothing more or less than teams of people and as such they are capable of the full range of human behaviour, from the inspiring to the depressing. New Environmentalists want to work with and within businesses to drive the development of a sustainable global economy, but that does not make them apologists for those regressive businesses still undermining this vision.

Finally - and this is the area where I take greatest exception with the criticism aimed at New Environmentalists by Kingsnorth and others - old school greens do not have a monopoly on appreciation of the natural world. Yes, we are investigating approaches that would try to measure the economic value of ecosystem services, or “put a price on nature” as our detractors argue. We understand the limits and risks associated with this approach and are extremely cautious about deploying this thinking in any way that allows further environmental degradation. But we also understand that the current approach allows critical environmental services, such as clean air, water, and soil, to be regarded as having no economic value, making them far more vulnerable to destruction than if we put an appropriate economic value on them.

I understand fully why some people find this concept offensive. In an ideal world, I'd find it offensive. But it is not an ideal world and let us not pretend the current approach is working. Public art, buildings, and architecture all have an economic value attached to them alongside regulations to ensure they are protected and a societal understanding that they are “priceless”. Why should environmental services not also have an economic value, which will inevitably be staggeringly high, alongside regulatory protection and a full understanding of their spiritual value? New Environmentalists care just as deeply

about the natural world as any hair shirted eco-warrior, it is just that we care enough to try and find a better way of protecting it.

A New Environmentalist Manifesto

If that is what the New Environmentalism is not, then what is it?

Last year, *BusinessGreen* made an imperfect attempt at defining the values progressive sustainable businesses should ascribe to with our [BusinessGreen Charter](#). The tenets we set out remain necessarily vague, but they are a reasonable starting point for assessing where most green businesses, and by extension New Environmentalists, stand. It is worth quoting the charter again in full:

- We recognise that business-as-usual is unsustainable.
- We will develop new business models that take account of environmental constraints.
- We are attempting to manage the risks posed by climate change and ecological degradation.
- We accept that we have environmental impacts and will strive to reduce them.
- We acknowledge that good regulations and policies will play a crucial role in the development of the low carbon economy.
- We understand that the short-term costs associated with green measures will deliver long-term benefits.
- We know that the low carbon economy will deliver countless commercial opportunities.
- We are striving to build a green economy by harnessing what businesses do best: investing and innovating on behalf of our stakeholders, customers and society as a whole.

In many ways these idealised values are frustratingly imprecise; so much so that critics could accuse them of being little more than opaque platitudes. But like the numerous communiqués, charters, and letters that business leaders have put their signatures to in recent years calling for real and urgent action to address climate change risks, these core values have to remain vague if they are also to remain inclusive. It is this that is one of the simultaneous strengths and weaknesses of the New Environmentalism: it is a continuously evolving and remarkably broad movement, incorporating everyone from Greenpeace campaigners to senior executives at multinational firms. Precise policy positions and technology preferences are still being hammered out as the evidence base evolves, often through fierce argument and failed experiments. But at the moment it is impossible to declare a firm, detailed, and comprehensive New Environmentalist position on complex issues such as carbon pricing or geo-engineering, just as older environmentalists never resolved internal tensions over nuclear power or GM crops.

But while these values may be vague, there is a suite of underlying principles that all New Environmentalists would accept. As previously alluded to, New Environmentalism is anti-business-as-usual, but unashamedly supportive of progressive and sustainable business models, as well as responsible forms of capitalism. It is also inherently optimistic and technocentric, but most of all it is highly pragmatic. It is based on nothing more or less than a cold headed assessment of the environmental risks we face and an evidence-based analysis of potential solutions. In this respect it is

not so much a new form of environmentalism, but a simple re-embracing of Enlightenment values and business best practices.

It is this pragmatism that is currently driving the next phase of the New Environmentalism, a shift from conceptual philosophising to technological deployment.

As environmental risks and climate change impacts intensify ever further it is blindingly apparent that the New Environmentalism must be about action, not endless debate. It might not command the headlines it deserves, but this action is now taking place all around the world. Renewables remains the primary energy investment category globally, while multinationals from Unilever to General Electric and Nike to IBM are investing billions in the rapid development of cutting-edge clean technologies. This deployment phase is not yet happening quickly enough, but it is already evident in the integration of solar panels and electric cars into our city-scapes, just as it is in the continued expansion of green investment funds and environmental policies. All the evidence points to an acceleration of this trend, with countries as diverse as the UK and South Korea, Brazil and Japan, and even India and China, embracing strategies that will support the rapid roll out of increasingly mature and cost effective low carbon infrastructure during the second half of this decade.

A recent debate hosted by the “[50 Months and Counting](#)” initiative stressed this focus on action with speakers including Professor Kevin Anderson, environmental campaigner George Monbiot, the Rev Giles Fraser, Green MP Caroline Lucas, and children’s author and teacher Saci Lloyd, all highlighting the need for clear and targeted action over the next four years designed to lay the foundations for a full blown low carbon transformation of our economy. The nature of this action may vary from community-level renewables or efficiency projects to political funding reform and a fundamental rethink of consumption patterns, but it is all designed to accelerate the emergence of sustainable economic models.

It is in this area where New Environmentalists can agree with Kingsnorth and his desire to build a more localised environmentalism, or, as he puts it, an adherence to the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh’s philosophy that “all great civilisations are built on parochialism”.

“Perhaps it’s time to go back to basics,” Kingsnorth writes. “So we might learn what grows wild in our local area and [whether we can eat it](#). We might build up a bank of practical skills, from horticulture to [land management](#). We might go out at night and [plant seeds](#) in vacant flowerbeds near where we live. We might work on small-scale engineering projects, from water purification technologies to micro-solar panels. We might work to save bees or butterflies or water meadows or woodlands or playing fields that we know and have a relationship with. We might walk in the hills, or on the canal bank, or in the local waste ground; get to know our place and how it works.”

Is it such a leap from this belief in a “parochial environmentalism” to the growing New Environmentalism movement towards community-owned micro-generation projects, energy efficiency retrofits designed to create more comfortable buildings and livable communities, “pay-as-you-live” shared ownership business models, and even corporate accounting efforts intended to better understand supply chain impacts and ecosystem services?

Getting the message right

The challenge for this New Environmentalism is in how best to disseminate its values and galvanise action at a global scale and a breakneck pace.

The first step has to be in publicly laying claim to a new moniker. The traditional green movement has delivered many remarkable achievements and boasts campaigners and thinkers who command and deserve immense respect. But unreconstructed “environmentalism” comes with too much cultural and political baggage to ever lead the march of new technologies, economic models, policies, and values into the mainstream - which is ultimately what is required and what we all want.

The emergence of New Labour may have left a remarkably mixed legacy, but it is an instructive example of how a movement can reinvigorate itself and reconnect with the public by embracing pragmatism and publicly distancing itself from elements that have long proven unpopular with a majority of people. I fear staging a “Clause 4 moment” around a totemic issue such as nuclear power or GM technology would risk tearing the environmental movement apart at a time when it needs to be united. But there would also be a powerful dividend to be gained from a public assertion that green campaigners and businesses understand the world has changed, are completely aligned with mainstream concerns, and are prescribing realistic, yet still ambitious, solutions to our environmental and, as importantly, economic problems.

Of course, a new name is meaningless without a new strategy, a renewed sense of mission. As the New Labour warrior Alastair Campbell has been only too keen to point out in recent months, the government’s current woes stem from the lack of an over-arching strategic vision that can provide the bedrock for clear and consistent communication.

The New Environmentalism needs a simple and unequivocal strategic vision that can then enable no more than four or five core messages. All successful social and economic transformations require an accessible and compelling message to present to the public that resonates with their concerns. Civil rights, feminism, international development, social democracy, neo-liberalism – all immensely complex, all successfully boiled down to a simple proposition that people can instantly recognise and understand. Whether it is the powerful plea for justice and equality of the civil rights movement, the calls for fairness of feminism, international development, and social democracy, or the arguments for freedom and opportunity presented by neo-liberals, a simple message is critical.

In contrast, environmentalism is all over the place and has been for years. Is it about protecting cuddly animals or tackling global climate change? Does it support clean technologies or regard them as modernist monstrosities? Is it necessarily apolitical or an integral part of people’s political identities? The answer, of course, is all of the above, but if environmentalists want their ideas to make it into the mainstream they cannot let the debates that surround every campaign, every technology, and every policy morph into staggeringly complex conversations that tackle every aspect of our economy and every aspect of our environment – or to put it another way, everything.

These debates still need to be had, but they should not define the manner in which New Environmentalists present themselves to the world. We need that simple and compelling message that people can instantly recognise and support. Luckily, businesses and campaigners increasingly understand this and, after years of messing around with photos of polar bears, they are working hard to develop green messaging that is both more accessible and more likely to resonate with its audience. The excellent new “Green is Working” campaign highlighting the economic and jobs benefits of low carbon investment is one good example of this approach in action, as is the growing body of ads that present electric cars and other clean technologies as cool desirable and modern, rather than green and worthy.

It is this combination of modernity and desirability that should be at the heart of the New Environmentalist proposition. If a single word description of the New Environmentalism is necessary it should be “progress”, or if that is too politically-loaded, “quality of life”. Frame all messaging with the understanding that “protecting the planet” is actually about improving “quality of life” for everyone, and then you have the foundations for the four or five key messages that should support all green campaigns, products, and business models. Namely, that clean technologies are better, not just greener; that energy efficiency and renewables deliver lower operating costs; that greener communities and businesses are cleaner, safer, and more comfortable than what we put up with currently; that low carbon investment delivers jobs and economic growth; and, if you want to scare people, that more sustainable business models help protect us against existential climate change threats and energy insecurity.

As anyone who has ever been on a media training course will know, the repetition of key messages at every opportunity is the most effective way to ensure that they reach their audience. New Environmentalists need to be fixated on presenting these positive arguments whenever they can. Yes, the never-ending debates over policy and technologies are important and must continue, but they should not define how New Environmentalists present themselves to the wider world. We have to make a positive case for change and tell a positive story about a better world.

Moreover, as the new chair of the UK’s Committee on Climate Change, Lord Deben, argued only this month, we need to be prepared to defend this positive vision and push back much harder against the vested interests and willfully misleading commentators who wish to tear it down. New Environmentalists should be much prouder of the progress that is being made and much more willing to fight to advance it.

Equally, they need to celebrate their successes and occasionally even thank the business and political leaders that help make them possible. Whether it is global giants such as IKEA and Unilever [pledging to become genuinely sustainable within eight years](#), innovative green start-ups such as Ecotricity and Good Energy seeking to bring clean energy to the public, or cutting-edge researchers working on the carbon capture and storage projects or ultra-efficient solar cells that could genuinely decarbonise our economies, we need to raise the profile of green success stories. Never in the history of campaigning has there been a group worse at celebrating and promoting its victories than environmentalism.

Thankfully, there is already remarkably sympathetic audience that is ready and willing to embrace the values of New Environmentalism. Climate sceptics may have enjoyed some success in convincing people that climate science is complex and uncertain, mainly because climate science is complex and uncertain, albeit not in the ways climate contrarians allege. But critics of the green economy have proven much less adept at turning the public against clean technologies that they can see and like. As [repeated polls have shown](#) a clear majority of the British public want to see more investment in renewable energy, and are opposed to our continued reliance on fossil fuels. Moreover, consumers and businesses are voting with their wallets, driving growing demand for green goods and services, and leading to a five per cent a year expansion in the UK's green economy, despite an otherwise sluggish economic backdrop. In short, people love the green economy and are happy to ignore the naysaying of vested interests and anti-green ideologues.

Deployment, deployment, deployment

However, despite this receptive audience, if it is to be successful New Environmentalism's strategic vision has to be backed by a "ground war" that is entirely focused on the rapid deployment of green technologies and business models.

As I have argued before, the model to learn from is the roll out of IT infrastructure during the 70s, 80s, and 90s, which managed to rapidly normalise computer and mobile phone technologies and deliver a deployment rate that rose exponentially for year after year. There are obvious differences between IT and clean tech in the scale of the barriers they face, but New Environmentalists should be busy memorising the play book of the early digital entrepreneurs and emulating their never-say-die evangelising and complete fixation on both cutting edge innovation and the grunt work of technological deployment.

This means focusing far more than is currently the case on the core business of transactional sales and installation, not to mention the collection of the kinds of successful case studies that can prove clean technologies and business models are working. Policies are important, but New Environmentalists need to repeatedly ask themselves: how will this policy accelerate the deployment of more sustainable technologies and business models? If the answer is not immediately apparent, then it is not a policy worth fighting for.

Providing this technological deployment with the support it needs will require environmentalists to work much closer with large corporations than many traditional greens are comfortable with. But, as politicians are wont to say, this time there is no alternative. Environmentalism has secured many important victories, but attempts to deliver international climate change treaties, forge a new economic settlement that takes account of sustainability, protect globally significant habitats, and scare the public and politicians into action have all ultimately failed. It is only by embracing a New Environmentalism that we will have any hope of tackling the daunting environmental challenges we now face, while still delivering the improved economies and societies that we all want, regardless of political or ideological affiliation.

New or Neo Environmentalism is here, it is real, and most of all it is working. A new road is being forged for the environmental movement, and to slightly misquote someone who many traditional environmentalists will instinctively recognise, the times are changing. Now is the moment to “get out of the way, if you can’t lend a hand”.

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