

Green shoots?

Interview with Natalie Bennett

Jo Littler and Susanna Rustin interview the new leader of the Green Party.

Jo Green Party policies on the whole seem to be left-wing and anti-neoliberal: arguing for re-nationalising the railways, the social redistribution of wealth and a citizens' living wage, and arguing against economic growth as the best indicator of social progress. How are you going to let more people know about this, and how do you see the Greens operating in relation to a traditional 'left' terrain?

Natalie There's a huge political space in Britain for a progressive left-wing party that plans, for example, to re-nationalise the railways, make the minimum wage a living wage, build more affordable council housing, rein in the banks and rebuild Britain's manufacturing industries and food production. These are policies the Green Party has supported throughout its history. However there's currently so much significant political space available to us because the Labour Party has moved so far to the right. The Green Party now has a huge responsibility to make sure we communicate those policies effectively, and that process is happening. I see more and more Labour Party voters joining the Green Party when they see us in their area, and when they see that we are serious political contenders. People seem to have been waiting for us and are delighted we're here. So communication is essential: we have the policies, we've just got to get out there and make sure people know about them. To spread the word, we need growth, and the party is growing. We have core centres of influence and support in Brighton, Norwich, Lancaster and Oxford, and we need to expand from those centres and become a truly national party. Ultimately we want to be visible on all the national stages, and our next practical step in achieving this will be the county council elections in 2013, where we think we can significantly increase

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the number of Green Party councillors. Then in 2014 we think we can triple the number of Green Party MEPs, increasing the number to six (seven including Scotland). That will mean many more people voting Green at council and European level, so that by 2015 voting Green in a Westminster election will not look like a protest vote: it will just be taking advantage of the options available. It will be a case of voting Green and actually getting Green.

Jo What are you going to do to help the Green Party move beyond its traditional, safe, white, middle-class constituencies?

Natalie We are already demonstrating in certain areas - the West Midlands, for example - that we have moved beyond that demographic. In Solihull, we've gone up from zero to six councillors in two years - and Solihull is nothing like Brighton or Lancaster. We have also recently got our first councillor in Dudley, Will Duckworth, now deputy Green Party leader. We are focusing on issues like the living wage and speaking up for people with disabilities and their need for decent benefits. We want to insulate people's homes and make sure they can afford to pay their fuel bills. We're also aiming to secure Britain's food supply, and reduce the huge price hikes from so much imported food. All these are policies that should appeal in poorer areas. And in the last by-election in Highgate in Camden, for the first time we won the council estate part of the ward. In the past, I think the Green Party has sounded a bit technocratic. That's something we need to avoid now. I always try to talk in a way that is immediately comprehensible. And yes, the Green Party is relatively white, just like every other political party. That's definitely a problem. We have a new ethnic minorities network in the party working to try to improve this situation. The Green Party does not produce career politicians in the same way other parties do - if you want to be a career politician, you don't come to the Green Party! Instead, it produces committed people who really want to make a difference. So when those people get elected, they really do try to institute change. Voters are recognising this. Once they have elected one Green they are realising the benefits and electing more.

Jo How are you tackling the difficulties of making it onto the news agenda?

Natalie Let's pick one area: education. The Green Party has very distinctive policies

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here, and Labour tends to be quite conservative. For example we are the only party opposed to free schools, which are an outgrowth of Labour's academies. The Green Party has the policies, but we have not always done the best job of selling them. It should be easy to get media attention because we have distinctive things to say, but the reality is that when we are approached it usually has something to do with ice floes! We also really want to be talking about the privatisation of the NHS, re-nationalising the railways, and this huge range of issues that we have distinctive policies on.

Jo Is there enough mainstream media interest in environmental issues?

Natalie It's true that the media tends to be quite conservative on environmental issues, and doesn't take enough interest. In general there's an address book journalists have with a list of people they go to on education, on health or on other issues, and it's essential to be on that list. I was speaking to a journalist recently who said Green Party policies are too radical for people to be interested in them. Lots of journalists think people are only interested in policies that the *Daily Mail* will entertain. But the fact is that the public is looking for alternative answers. It is very clear that neoliberalism and globalisation have been an absolute disaster for the British economy and the world economy; for the British environment and the world environment. The media is doing a very poor job of giving people a menu of options to choose from. The options are out there. It's just very hard to get them any airtime.

Jo What relationship do the Greens have to the austerity agenda? There's been a lot of controversy in Brighton and Hove, for example, over the Green council implementing coalition cuts and sacking people.

Natalie When the Greens in Brighton and Hove set their first budget, they tried to implement the maximum 3.5 per cent council tax rise. This would have meant substantially fewer cuts. Unfortunately, because the Greens were only a minority administration, they didn't have the votes to carry the budget on their own. Labour sided with the Tories. Labour forced the cuts to happen because they *prevented* the council tax rise that would have raised enough money to make it possible to stop the cuts. So Green councillors in Brighton and Hove then had the

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options of either handing the budget over to the Tories, or of doing their utmost to produce the best possible budget. I'm confident that they did a good job of the latter. We tried very hard to not have a 'cuts budget' - cuts were minimal compared to what is happening in most places. The process itself was open and people were consulted and listened to, so that when cuts had to be made, Green councillors identified the best way to make them work.

Jo What will you be aiming for in terms of an alternative to the austerity agenda?

Natalie For the general election in 2010 we had our first fully-costed manifesto. That was a 'no cuts' manifesto, although there were some exceptions. We intended to cut Trident, nuclear weapons, road building, and to pull out of the war in Afghanistan. We had a programme based on the wealthy and multinational companies paying their fair share of tax. We rebalanced the tax system and ensured that we maintained benefit levels and maintained government services. The mathematics in that budget showed that this is perfectly possible to achieve. The current system reveals a huge tax deficit. As we've found with Starbucks, Google, Ikea and everyone else on that list, many companies aren't paying their taxes. That is why we have a budget problem.

Susanna Who are the MPs and other British politicians you most admire?

Natalie I admire Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru, with whom I've shared platforms on several occasions. Plaid Cymru is a party we have much in common with, for example a belief in localism and local control. Leanne Wood is representing Wales on those issues, and trying to implement a very different kind of politics, one that's consensual. The culture of the Welsh Assembly also helps. Another politician I admire - although whose politics I perhaps have less in common with - is Alex Salmond. He has shown with the SNP how it's possible to go from being what is seen as a minority, special-interest fringe party to running a government.

Susanna If a future rainbow coalition government were to be formed, what would you, as Green leader, pick as your cabinet post, if you couldn't be Prime Minister or Chancellor?

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Natalie Green Party experience of coalition government around the world has not been encouraging. We would be more likely to look for a 'confidence and supply' arrangement in the event of a hung parliament. This is a system in which you negotiate your 'red lines' which the other party or parties must then agree to. It's hard to say now exactly what those issues would be; we'd certainly be thinking about Trident and nuclear power stations, but it'd depend what was on the table at the time. The Green Party would then ensure the government did not fall while remaining free to vote as our consciences dictated on particular bills. So a confidence and supply deal would be more important to us than cabinet positions. We're not after the chauffeur-driven car.

Jo How should the UK government be dealing with climate change?

Natalie The main requirement is a decent energy policy. Germany, for example, has announced that it will aim for its entire energy supply - not just power, but all energy - to be reliant on renewables by 2050. Britain needs to give industries more certainty about the future. The way to achieve this is through onshore and offshore wind farms, solar power, tidal power, and building a renewable energy policy that works. Such policies should secure our supply, help industry and provide lots of jobs. As the House of Lords recently identified, the government is also currently poor on energy conservation. Britain should be developing a decentralised, resilient grid relying on lots of small power sources from all over the country, with as many buildings as possible heading towards self-sufficiency. Kirklees council has just built a primary school that is sixty per cent energy self-sufficient; most of its energy is generated on-site. All buildings should be like that. The other aspect of a strong response to climate change is for Britain to stop declaring it can build an economy on financial services. We need to bring manufacturing and food production back to Britain. It is astonishing and disgraceful that only seven per cent of the food consumed in this country actually comes from here. To prepare for a low-carbon world we need to shorten our supply chains - particularly in food but also in clothing, furniture and other daily essentials. We need to greatly reduce carbon emissions by limiting the way we transport things around both the country and the world. Of course, that also means the end for the current model of extremely large supermarkets, which is entirely unsustainable.

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Susanna Does that amount to de-globalisation?

Natalie Yes. Although there will always be some things that it's necessary to produce at a global level. There will probably only ever be one global manufacturer of high-tech medical scanning machines, for example, and it might be that production of computers is limited to a small number of places, because of economies of scale and technical specialisation. However, it clearly doesn't make sense to grow carrots in Scotland, take them down to Cornwall and then drive them back to Scotland to be sold. This is the kind of madness that happens now. We have hollowed out our society while we have hollowed out our economy. If we have a few large multinational companies dealing exclusively with parts shipped in from China, these companies end up producing low-level retail jobs (usually poorly paid and not very interesting), plus a few driving jobs. A small number of high-level people will run this huge multinational corporation from the centre. There are no other jobs built around it: no technical jobs, no skilled jobs, no farm work. This predominance of multinational corporations means the risk of a jobless society. That doesn't make sense. You need strong local economies to create a range of work for everyone. The Bristol pound is a good example of something being done to improve this situation. If you have a local greengrocer who buys supplies from the farm just outside town, and the farmer employs an accountant just down the road, and the accountant employs a local builder - who in turn employs someone to look after their children - the pound that bought the first potato from the farmer circulates round and round in the local economy. That pound provides good quality jobs and social interactions between people who know and trust each other. This is a strong basis for society. It is the absolute opposite of the globalised situation that we have now.

Jo On a global level, the Greens hold positions of power in Brazil, France and Germany. That obviously has a lot to do with those countries' specific histories, but what do you think you can learn from Green parties across the globe?

Natalie The Green Party is the political wing of the green movement. Here, that green movement includes UK Uncut, Occupy, Transition Towns, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and similar groups. In the same way, we're part of the green movement globally, and a part of Green politics globally. Everyone in that movement

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has a shared understanding that we're currently living as though we had three planets when we've actually got one. The green movement is very clear on the fact that we have to move to a 'one planet' style of living very soon. We can learn from both the successes and mistakes of those other parties. One of the big differences between us and many continental Green parties is that they tend to be squeezed into certain political spaces as a consequence of proportional representation. There are many alternative left parties vying with the Greens for political space. When I go to Brussels and have meetings with European Greens, it's also evident that they think of us as much more radical than most European Green parties. So we do occupy a different political space because of different national politics; and we're less divided. That means that our Green Party contains many different strands that are often spread out over many parties in continental Europe.

Susanna The Green Party obviously favours a more pluralistic political system, with more smaller parties. Is there a danger with the weakness of the Lib Dems that Britain could move back to a two-party system and become more like the US?

Natalie I think it's true that the Lib Dems are going to disappear, with some local exceptions. But people's affiliation to all political parties has been diminishing over recent years at great speed. People no longer say 'I'm Tory' or 'I'm Labour till I die'. If we don't change the political system, we're going to see a lot more volatility. People are not necessarily going to vote Labour just because they always have. They may be prepared to vote for the independent candidate who will defend their NHS, for example. So, even with first-past-the-post we might start to get lots more different sorts of people and parties elected - though in a splintering effect - because people have had enough of almost indistinguishable Labour and Tory candidates. But it is also possible that because of disillusionment with the system turnout just gets lower and lower. That would be extremely dangerous. The democratic state depends upon consent and participation. People must vote. It is essential to acknowledge that politics is where decisions are made. Even if you go into the polling booth and write a rude word on the ballot paper, at least you're showing your dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Susanna If the Liberal Democrats do fade away and leave a vacuum as a consequence of their disastrous decision to join the coalition, might that not be quite dangerous?

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They have spent decades building up their political position. If that project fails could our democracy be damaged? Greens cannot just step in and fill the gap.

Natalie We can try! The problem with the Liberal Democrat project was that they didn't truly stand for anything except getting elected. There may have been a small number of civil liberties policies they stood for, but they quickly reneged on those. Economically, the Liberal Democrats stood for any policies or approach they thought would get them elected in a specific area. This means Liberal Democrats in different constituencies present different policies.

Susanna They stood for political reform, didn't they?

Natalie But they settled for an AV referendum, rather than insisting on a full PR referendum. If the latter had happened it would have been a very different beast to the referendum we actually had. I argued that people should vote yes in the referendum, but when I was asked why, all I could say was that it would be marginally better than the current system. As a way to sell change to people this was too limiting. I think a PR referendum could have been won but an AV referendum was never winnable. The Liberal Democrats' main mistake was not going into the coalition; it was their failure to insist on a PR referendum. As a consequence they have failed to deliver an entirely new politics at the next election. I've been uncomfortable with the Liberal Democrats for a long time, particularly at a local level. Obviously I'm not talking about every individual - of course there are good people in the Liberal Democrat Party. However in general my experience of the Lib Dems collectively in local politics was that they were frequently cynical, dishonest and untrustworthy. I might have voted Lib Dem before I became involved in politics and saw them in action. I would never have voted for them afterwards.

Susanna You have said you want the Greens to take over from the Liberal Democrats as Britain's third party. Does that mean that, like the Liberal Democrats, you'll be trying to win Tory votes?

Natalie Lots of people who vote Tory back many Green policies. One constituent in a Tory-dominated part of Chester recently commented that the Green leaflet was the

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first non-Tory political leaflet she had ever received. Conserving the environment, building up local economies, creating local jobs, insulating houses, reining in the banks, preventing mad financial speculation, reshaping Britain's economy to work for the people: many people who vote Tory are entirely comfortable with these suggestions. One thing I need to try to do as leader is not to use language that these people might instinctively be alienated by. We need to avoid the casual use of words that people react against. We can present our policies in ways that make clear they are relevant to people who would not normally identify themselves as 'left-wing'. Most people from both left and right would agree with reining in the banks - except for the one per cent of the population that is comprised of bankers. Everyone also recognises that it's essential to bring manufacturing and food production back to Britain. More and more people go into the supermarkets and see beans from Kenya and peas from Peru and realise that this is not a sustainable situation. There is huge public support for a plastic bag tax. Even some of what are considered to be our more radical policies are actually in line with public opinion. The idea of treating drugs as a health rather than a criminal issue, for example, is widely supported, to the point that Tories are now acknowledging that the war on drugs has failed.

Jo There's been a substantial expansion in green capitalism, and products and projects that use environmentalism as a branding tool whilst having an environmentally retrograde impact. How would you tackle this?

Natalie If the advert has a large flashing light stating how green the product is, it's time to start asking questions. But we are not trying to stop people from buying things. Instead we want to make the environmentally-friendly option the cheapest and easiest, so that it's the option people choose anyway. Ultimately, the Green Party is not about individual behaviour - but if we were running the government we would want those adverts to be absolutely honest. If we take transport as an example, the Greens would aim to make public transport cheaper than using your car. That way you don't have to force people to stop using their cars because the public transport option is cheap, regular and reliable enough. People would like their children to walk to school but at the moment, people feel roads are unsafe and feel forced to get into their cars. If you create a situation where the roads are safe enough, children could go back to walking to school. It's very hard for one individual parent to make a difference like this. Instead you need to change the

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whole society. We need to create a system in which laws, taxes, everything operates in a way that makes green the natural way to act. Then it won't just be about individual consumer decisions.

Susanna Looking ahead to 2015 and beyond, what are your feelings about what's happening within Labour? Are you optimistic that a Labour Party might emerge that the Greens can work with at some future date, given that a majority Green government is unlikely?

Natalie Sadly, all the signs suggest that until 2015 the Labour Party will hunker down, try to not say anything that offends anyone, try to not do anything that admits the mistakes they made while in government, and wait for the Tories to fall over and for the votes to fall into Labour's lap. They'll enter the 2015 election with a weak manifesto that aims to be all things to all people, does not stand for very much at all and certainly does not repudiate the worst mistakes of the Blair-Brown years. I'm not sure what will happen in that election, but the Greens would certainly not back a minority Tory administration. This means we would be left with Labour, and would have to find a way forward.

Susanna With the climate crisis so pressing, aren't environmentalists better served by lobbying existing politicians rather than supporting what remains a small party?

Natalie David Cameron and his friends have made clear that the lobbying model is dead. This is evident from what I have heard from Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. People believed it was possible to lobby Labour, but Labour broadly failed on the environment - although their climate bill was good. The belief was that it would be possible to lobby this government too, especially when they put a green tree on their logo. However, lobbying has failed to deliver any amelioration in their climate-deadly policies. This means it's necessary to go into party politics. The evidence is very clear that lobbying by the green movement has failed as a tactic.

Susanna There is obviously a strong case in this country in favour of renewables. However, not everyone has our resources in terms of wind and sea, and the arguments around nuclear power are fiercely contested. Do you think there are

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issues in the broader green movement about evidence that need to be tackled?

Natalie The problem with foregrounding 'evidence-based policy' is that the other side can pull up some figures that suggest something different - figures that might not be reliable - and it becomes increasingly difficult for the ordinary person watching TV news to keep track. However, the fact that Germany - which has proved itself to be the state most competent at managing engineering, public administration and environmental organisation - is saying that its energy supply can be entirely based on renewables, and they want to be free from fossil fuels, is something to bear in mind. Another essential fact that doesn't get highlighted enough is that we know how much renewable energy sources are going to cost in the future. The wind, sun and tide will always be free. You can deliver dependable certainty with renewables which is entirely lacking with fossil fuels. Supposedly fixed prices of oil keep going up, gas is an unknowable quality, especially as the amount that fracking can produce in Britain is small, and relying on imported supplies raises serious questions.

Jo What's your opinion on direct action? Does it work?

Natalie The Green Party believes in non-violent direct action. As I had to say multiple times to a disbelieving ITV correspondent outside Hinckley Power Station (hoping she would ask her questions quickly, as I was sinking into some very deep mud), we are a political party and as such we believe in action through parliament. However, we also understand that direct action is essential in terms of piling on political pressure. If you go back through British political history, non-violent direct action has always been essential, particularly in terms of making the people in charge understand that things have to change.

This interview took place in London in November 2012.

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