

Jonathan Bartley and Sian Berry's speech to Autumn Conference 2020



Green Party

2 October 2020

[Sian]

Welcome to this extraordinary Green Party conference!

We're really sorry we can't all be together today – but it does give me and Jonathan a chance to do things a little bit differently!

So we have come here to the Broadgate cinema, in one of the very oldest parts of London.

Because we think at a moment like this, it's good to reflect on our history – and plan for our future.

We live in such alarming times, but they are also times of possibility.

[Jonathan]

If your social media is anything like mine, your feed will be full of people asking:

“What the hell is up with 2020?”

Fires in the arctic and the US.

Refugees in the channel.

Thousands sleeping rough on our streets.

A pandemic that has killed a million people.

I was sitting at home a couple of weeks ago, and I switched on “Extinction: the facts” – the David Attenborough documentary.

And I found the tears just rolling down my cheeks.

But I think I was crying for two reasons.

There's the obvious one.

Who is not moved by the countless species being lost?

How?

How, have we let this mass destruction happen?

But the second reason was the poignancy with which the Attenborough programme brought home the connections between the climate and the ecological crisis, coronavirus, and the way our economy and society is structured.

Everything is a green issue. Everything is connected.

That is finally being recognised.

[Sian]

"There is no economy on a dead planet."

That's what we often used to say.

But this awful pandemic, that we are just part way through, has already made us recognise like never before the truly deep connections between our people, society and our planet.

We have seen that it is people of colour and the working class who will suffer disproportionately from climate breakdown.

People of colour and the working class who have always suffered disproportionately from health inequality, social inequality and racism.

And it is people of colour and the working class who are suffering disproportionately from coronavirus.

We have gained new perspectives from this terrible crisis.

And new perspectives too from our Government's failing attempts to forge its response to the pandemic within a prevailing economic system that just wasn't built for resilience in a crisis.

One of the most telling failures is the contracting out of test and trace.

This has left us – in just about every area across the country – without even the data on the virus's spread that we need – to act, and properly plan our local responses.

It is heartbreaking that we are not better prepared for this second wave.

Because the Government failed.

Because it handed the job to a company that couldn't deliver.

Contracting out is what Governments do when they have lost confidence in

their own leadership; lost confidence in local communities.

And we won't get the virus under control without a test and trace system that works in every local area.

We have been saying for months that the Government needs to work with local authorities, communities and public health teams.

These are the people who can deliver.

The failure now must be fixed.

The Government needs to think

in new and better ways, because we have the proof, in the worst way today, that its old models aren't fit for purpose.

[Jonathan]

Think back for a minute.

Do you remember how you felt when we first went into lockdown.

If you are anything like me there was a whole spectrum of emotion: Fear. Uncertainty. Disbelief. Frustration. Worry about those we love.

Then just for a moment.

In the middle of all the horror of the pandemic, we glimpsed that a different world might be possible.

The amazing resilience of businesses changing and adapting the way they worked.

Communities coming together in solidarity and compassion to care and support one another.

Our most valuable workers recognised as the key workers that they are – running the vital services on which we all rely.

Debt in our NHS paid off.

Intervention to support people's incomes.

Rough sleepers off our streets.

In the middle of all the tragedy, all the heartache and the hardship, we had a glimpse of something new.

I think that deep down everyone believes that a different and better world might be possible.

A world where everything you need – a strong, resilient community – is close at hand where you live

Where you have a right to work from home.

Where everyone has a home.

Where renters have the right to fair rents and cannot be evicted.

Imagine if our response to an emergency like coronavirus was to plan and build that better world from the things we learned?

[Sian]

One – Zero – zero – zero – zero – zero – zero – zero – zero – zero, zero, zero

That was a headline in one newspaper after we said that we should be investing one hundred billion pounds a year to transform our economy into something new.

They printed it in full with eleven zeros – as the headline – right across the page.

We planned last year to invest this much because, in the face of inequality, injustice and the climate emergency the right answer was to think big and invest – to transform the way we live and work, for the better.

And guess what?

The Government has already committed over three times that amount, to grappling with coronavirus over just six months.

Because in the face of such an emergency you do whatever it takes.

But just imagine what we could do if we planned ahead for the emergencies to come.

Not wait for them to hit, but build resilience securely through a Green New Deal.

If we invested ahead of time to create the new jobs we need, in the new industries we need.

Building resilience, not only to weather this storm, but to have a stronger shelter from the next one too.

[Jonathan]

We can eliminate poverty.

I'll say that again because some people might have thought they misheard.

We can eliminate poverty.

And not just that.

We know how to do it.

Right now.

A universal basic income.

We have proposed it for years.

And it's an idea whose time has come.

A regular, unconditional payment made to everyone.

We can make poverty impossible.

We can abolish destitution.

AND give everyone more life choices – the choices the privileged often take for granted – to study, change career, retrain, care for a loved one.

Investing in people so they can weather whatever storms may come.

A universal basic income would provide security during this pandemic and beyond as we transform society in the face of the climate emergency.

Another world is possible.

Better is possible.

It is within our reach.

[Jonathan]

Over 70 years ago the United Nations came together in the aftermath of the horror of the Second World War and they drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

They told the world in clear terms what we should have.

By right. As human beings.

That vision won't be complete until every person has enough; not just for their basic needs, but for a fulfilled life.

And we believe that world is possible.

It's why for years, the Green Party has got together for conferences like the one we are kicking off today to set out our vision and how we can achieve it.

And this week we'll get together slightly differently with online voting for the first time.

And together we'll debate and vote on ideas for:

Reparations to create global justice and put right the legacy of the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans, colonial exploitation, and

our debt to the world for the pollution we have emitted.

Rewilding our country and giving every young person a meaningful education that will equip them to shape their rapidly changing world.

Bringing in new ideas for transport that respond directly to the coronavirus crisis.

And new economics to create resilience and truly build back better.

Ideas that say better is possible.

[Sian]

Ruth Bader Ginsburg – who was so often on the dissenting side of Supreme Court decisions, said this:

“Dissents speak to a future age.”

She saw dissenters as those who are unafraid to depart from prevailing wisdom and say what is right.

A few years ago, the Green Party dissented in a big way.

While all the other parties embraced the ideology of austerity, we stood firmly against it.

We said it was a lie.

We said that the economic mainstream was wrong.

We argued for investment not cuts.

We said it would be worth it. That austerity was the plain wrong response to the economic crisis we faced.

And we were proved right.

We have dissented against doubters and cynics.

The ones who said renewable energy would be too expensive.

Or that a living wage would cost jobs.

That we couldn't succeed and stop fracking.

Or Heathrow expansion.

Time and time again our bold ideas of today have become the common sense of tomorrow.

Right now we again have important decisions to make, in the face of a crisis.

Again, Greens know that something better than business-as-usual is possible and we're arguing for a dramatic change of direction.

Other politicians are arguing again for cutbacks and cancelling investment in the wake of the economic shock of coronavirus, a trade-off between the economy and saving lives.

But we dissent.

We say that our plan for recovery cannot be a re-run of austerity economics, and that with a Green New Deal and a basic income we can break free from the old thinking for good.

And the public are with us. They want a new normal. Many people:

already suffering from the injustices baked into the system, who lost their loved ones, they can see clearly that this was because business-as-usual left them far too vulnerable.

Vulnerable both to catching the virus and suffering more from its effects.

For all these people, the coronavirus crisis has been a wake-up call.

So, people are crying out for a green recovery, one that builds fairness, that builds resilience.

The country is ripe for change today.

We all want a new world, and a new way of living.

[Jonathan]

The ancient Greeks had a word for a pivotal moment of change.

Kairos.

There is no one word in today's English language that completely encompasses its meaning.

It is sometimes translated as "supreme" moment.

A time for action.

A moment of truth.

It was used by black theologians in Apartheid South Africa, as their country was plunged into political crisis and they battled against religious and political oppression.

"A crisis" they said "is a judgment that brings out the best in some people and the worst in others.

A crisis is a moment of truth that shows us for what we really are."

There is no doubt that we are now at a kairos moment in our history as humans.

And it will show us not just who we really are but what we can be.

[Sian]

In our history, the global human race has moved out of the long age of kings

Into these last three centuries of capital, colonialism and exploitation.

And now we have pushed everything to its limits.

We are now at a moment of truth, and the future is holding its breath for what we do next.

This is the time for action, and right now we could choose to build a new future of fellowship and balance – a new age of the citizen.

Or we could face our last gasps as a civilisation.

Arundhati Roy famously said:

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”

And I think if we all listen now, today, at this moment, we can hear her loud and clear.

[Jonathan]

In the early 1990s I was working in the House of Commons and I got a letter across my desk from an academic in Scotland suggesting that we should cancel the debts of the poorest countries in the year 2000.

The idea was preposterous at the time.

No one was talking about it, let alone considering it.

But that idea was taken up by campaign groups.

Then unions.

Then churches.

Then community organisations.

And it became the Jubilee 2000 movement.

And it went global.

And a few years later the G8 was sitting around discussing not whether they could cancel debt in the developing world, but which country’s debt would be written off.

Movements change things.

Our country has a rich and incredible history of movements for change, built on dissent from the established order.

Of ideas that needed to be pushed from the grassroots. And whose time did come.

In the heat and crisis of the English Civil War, the Levellers called for democracy and equality.

The Diggers demanded common rights to land and the first health service.

The Chartists fought for Just Representation to include the working class.

The abolitionists said slave trafficking must end.

The suffragists and suffragettes said Votes for Women,

And those who came together to say

Ban the Bomb,

Free Nelson Mandela,

Drop the Debt,

Stop the War,

Black Lives Matter.

These diverse movements are the history of our country too.

[Sian]

There were no Pride parades this year, so I rewatched the film Pride for the tenth or eleventh time to compensate.

If you don't know the story it is about how in the 1980s a London-based group of lesbian and gay activists raised money and forged links with towns, villages and families in Wales who were fighting the miners' strike.

As a piece of our history, and as a film, it shows so well the humanity in every struggle, and the common ground and solidarity between causes that can be so powerful – when we don't let those who are trying to grind us down, divide us.

They both knew their struggles were the same, that the same Government was trying to dismiss and destroy their communities.

David Donavan, one of the valleys miners, knew this too when he spoke at the Pits and Perverts benefit concert in Camden and he said:

“It won't change overnight, but now a hundred and forty thousand miners know ... about blacks and gays and nuclear disarmament and we will never be the same.”

This is the very essence of solidarity.

And today we are also seeing a revival in solidarity – between activists for the same cause, and between activists making the links between different causes.

Today of course young climate campaigners are allies of Black Lives Matter. Because climate justice, economic justice and racial justice are not divisible.

[Jonathan]

Let me tell you about my friend Pete.

(there he is)

I'm in awe of Pete.

He's run over a hundred and sixty marathons for charity. But that's not just why I respect him so much.

Pete is a councillor.

And he won his seat in Labour's safest ward in Lambeth, South London.

How?

Because he stood alongside residents against the council's estate demolition programme.

Including the one where he lives.

And because he brought together and united those concerned about the terrible environmental and health impact of the council's plans, with those whose homes and communities were being threatened.

Like Pete we need to be the ones bringing the movements together and making the links between the climate emergency and social justice.

[Sian]

Not every Green Party member studies it every day, but we have a written philosophical basis.

In that philosophical basis and our core values, the Green Party recognises that it is the political arm of a wider movement.

And like our country, our party's history is also one of movements and solidarity.

Our party, our values – and our approach to leadership – grew alongside work among movements here in the UK that fought some of the most important battles of the last century.

Standing against unconscionable weapons of mass destruction, and against coal power plants, gas pipelines, oil drilling, fracking and nuclear power.

We campaigned and won against the bulldozers, curtailed Margaret Thatcher's massive road building programme, protecting the countryside, and calling out the truth that new roads create new traffic.

And in this century, Greens have been at the heart of new local networks looking forward and building resilience ready for a transition away from oil dependency.

And we are forging new alliances for green energy and community controlled housing with renters and workers.

Jonathan

And what I really love about our party's history is that we have never been scared to stand with movements that aren't always neat and tidy or even well behaved.

Because they are genuine. Because they come from the grassroots, from people without power, whose voices must be heard.

The global movement to stop trade deals designed to drive down the global south, and put corporations above the law.

Backing LGBTIQ+ rights against the deepest prejudices and fear.

Supporting renters' unions and new unions for workers in the gig economy.

Standing up against racism and for migrants, when every other party was pandering to campaigns of hate and division.

Standing alongside strikers and rebels who demand action on the climate emergency.

Just over a year ago, I was waiting to do a TV interview just in front of Parliament.

I spotted some young people, who were part of the school strike for the climate, and went over to talk to them.

They explained their frustration about how no one seemed to be taking any notice.

So I said to them:

"Go and get as many of your friends as possible, stand behind me and make as much noise as you can, and I'll see what I can do."

Within 15 minutes they had found 500 young people.

And as I did the interview live on prime time TV, I was able to turn around and point to them and say

“This is what real leadership looks like. Listen to what they are saying about the climate crisis.”

Today’s social movements, like the school strikers, need the Green Party to be strong.

And our role within our founding movements has shifted.

As more of the work we can do to support them is now from elected positions.

In our roles as elected representatives, we must forge new ways of working with these movements, listening to them and getting their voices heard.

And we must do this with a new solidarity – one of kindness, respect and support for every person outside our party as well as within.

Solidarity between the many different movements and causes that are growing and making their voices heard at this moment of truth.

Our party has changed and grown so much since we started more than four decades ago.

And we must keep changing.

So, in this crucial moment of truth, what next?

[Sian]

For the Greens, 2019’s local elections were spectacular!

This year’s elections were postponed.

So I know that, as a party, we could not be more ready for next year – 2021- to fight more winning campaigns in Wales and in London and in councils across the country.

I cannot wait for next May!

The Green Party is a serious party, a major party now, one with more credibility than ever before.

Whose ideas and hard work make a difference.

And as we take more positions with more power, running councils in cooperation with other parties, and more places at the table in more towns and cities, the length of time that journey will take – from Green policies and ideas representing ‘dissent’ to becoming ‘common sense’ – will get shorter and shorter still.

In London we only have to campaign and pester for two or maybe three years now before the current Mayor takes up our ideas – on things like rent controls, preventing demolition and giving ballots to residents on estates, action on air pollution and traffic, green energy for the tube.

But we'll only get change as fast as we need when we have a Green Mayor.

Everywhere in the country, as a party now, we must work harder than ever to build our team, we must support each other better, bring forward new people, and train harder together to be ready for the serious and important work of having and using power.

[Jonathan]

And we know that we must get ready to grow even more as a party.

There are now so many people with no political home, who are crying out for representation.

Who know that climate justice, social justice and racial justice are the same goals.

Who still hope for a better world.

So here's an invitation.

If you want to shape the future, not repeat the past.

If you too feel that this is a moment of truth where every person must play their part.

The Green Party is your home, so join us.

Like Councillor Pete Elliott standing up for justice on his Lambeth estate we are on your side.

Like Lesbians and Gays teaming up with the miners, we know that all our struggles are linked together.

At this moment of truth...

We need a new democracy based on cooperation not conflict.

[Sian]

At this moment of truth, it is down to all of us – to choose which path we take.

So come with us and together we can forge a path – to that future we can already glimpse across the hill, and hear when we hold our breath.

This is not a path that is already built, or which is easy or obvious to tread.

New paths are only made when people take the first steps and walk in a new direction.

So join us and let's take those steps together.

Because we – and you – know that better is possible.

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