

Citizen Gains

The crisis of service-delivery is central to the crisis of the Left. **Paul Corrigan, Trevor Jones, John Lloyd and Jock Young** outline a new deal for the public services

If the Left cannot carry conviction in the area of public service, it cannot carry conviction anywhere else. For a century, it has made the sphere of public provision its own: in shaping it, defining it, providing a functional morality for it, protecting it, it has constructed its largest contribution to national life – and international, too, since the ideas and practices first generated in the UK were picked up and developed world-wide.

That is why a crisis in the public service area is always at best an ambiguous matter for the Left – even when the crisis can plausibly be ‘blamed’ on the Conservative government. For in doing so much to construct this sphere, we have raised reasonable expectations that the network of Labour institutions – Labour-held local authorities, trade unions, bureaucracies created under Labour’s aegis, even local Labour parties – can and should be responsible for its efficient maintenance. Insofar as the Left has failed to convince the public that they have been so responsible, so the Left has suffered.

The problems posed by the government’s attitude towards local government have been made clear, but what has also been needed was a determined and profound reflection on the nature of the Left’s commitment to and practice of public provision. It is an indictment, most of all of the social-democratic wing of the Left (we use the word quite distinctly from the party meaning it has come to have), that it did not do so: and that the only people who did so were those who commanded the ‘new left’ local authorities – as the Greater London Council, the Inner London Education Authority, many London boroughs, Manchester and, at different times, others (Walsall, Edinburgh). Their ‘municipal new leftism’ has itself now failed and is either conducting a long and bitter retreat at the expense, most of all, of their authority’s citizens: or adopting policies which implicitly recognise that their former stance was one which ignored or downgraded the needs of the majority in their area of responsibility. But – to restate the point – at least the municipal new leftists *tried*: and while many Labour authorities conducted their affairs extremely efficiently and with little public resonance (the borough of Sedgefield, near Darlington, with a rock-solid Labour majority has kept it so by a standard efficiency which won commendation from the Audit Commission), those on the Left critical of municipal new leftism have not yet cared to elaborate their critique into an alternative.

Opposition to municipal new leftism is not, however, the main reason for doing so. The main reason is to give the Left a basis for proposing itself as a governing force again: to allow it to rebuild a functional basis for wielding power. As we have suggested, a functioning philosophy in the public sphere is

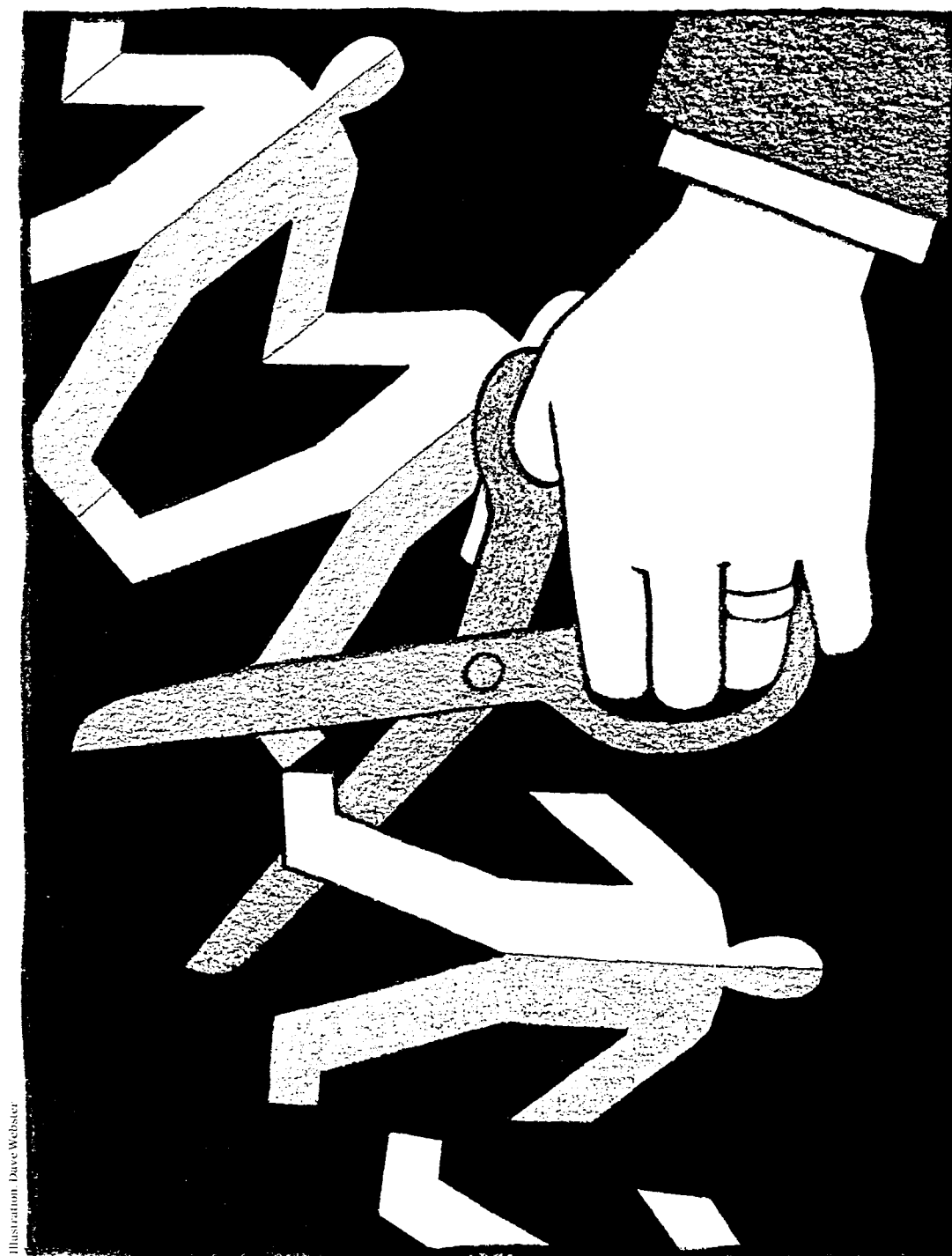


Illustration: Dave Webster

crucial to the Left's success more generally: and since it is faced with a government whose leader has thrown down the most arrogant of gages – 'There is no such thing as society: there are only individuals and their families' – it has every reason to believe that hard work in this area could mean success.

We do not think that the crisis of welfarism and of the public services is caused by 'Thatcherism', or, more simply, by cuts in spending. More precisely, while we can see that a certain kind of crisis is or can be caused by expenditure cuts – that will be specially hard-felt in the social security reforms which came into force in April – that is not the crisis we address and we think it is the less important in the sense that it is shorter run and capable of relatively easy 'solution' in its own terms.

A crisis of *service delivery* would have occurred even had Labour been in power over the past decade: and though it might have been masked for some time by increased resources, the longer-run problems would have asserted themselves even more powerfully than they already had in the 1970s, when Labour held power. It is still worth saying (though the point is now more widely taken than in the past) that the provision of resources is always and everywhere subject to a series of restraints – restraints which are probably stronger now, as people get used to lower tax bands. Increased expenditure should *never*, in any case, be used as a proxy for better management and better direction of existing resources.

We do not deny or minimise the very serious problems in the health service, the social services, the provision of welfare, the provision of legal services and other sectors which the squeeze on funding has had and will continue to have. But we want to locate a large part of the crisis where it must, ultimately, return: in the relationship between *citizens* and the state, and the institutions of the state. In very large part that is because it is there where democracy either flourishes or decays – and it is our belief that it is decaying. In part, too, it is because it is that complex of relationships which socialism had sought to make its own – many of them it, after all, created – and which it has the responsibility to address now.

Social democracy in practice *did* things to and for people. It did things which were self-evidently good: it brought and ensured full employment; made education more accessible; extended social security; improved the housing stock; made health provision free at the point of use, and steadily increased the range of medical services. While these things have not, of course, made the British people *equal*, still there is little dispute that they have improved the life standards and life chances of the very great majority.


But there were, of course, dangers.

The largest of these we can characterise in this way: the form of social democracy practised by successive Labour and Conservative governments in Britain functioned, very largely, at the technical and expert and bureaucratic levels. It did not really seek to mobilise a political base of support – or, for that matter, of involved criticism – nor did it propose a relationship which was other than that of the giver and receiver. The relationship had no real possibilities of reciprocity. Benefits of all kinds were given because of a particular *state* – being unemployed, being old, being poor, being a mother. Council housing was given on need (it was not of course always *available* on need) and, until recently, it was maintained, painted, repaired by the public authority, not the tenant. The size, curricula, teaching methods of schools were determined by politicians and expert debate, and given to the people whose children were to be educated: parents were given no statutory, and often no informal, rights of consultation or even of information. Impressionistically, we can say that the collective state of minds of the givers was of high-minded, somewhat self-sacrificing public service which tended to become routinised, bureaucratically imperialist and cynical: on the part of the receivers, it was of gratitude and a real sense of an improved and more varied world which tended to become complaining, impatient of restrictions, distrustful of 'them' and their social engineering and latterly – among those for whom public provision largely shapes their lives – dependency.

This mutual loss of the original relationship of caring giver and grateful receiver has found no real replacement. The Conservative Party, until recently, administered local authorities in much the same way as Labour councils – though the authorities the former controlled tended to have fewer receivers within their jurisdiction. Within the Labour Party, the Left has sought to encourage those to whom public provision was targeted to demand more of it at lower prices or free. It has mainly been the Left which initiated a movement of local authority resources into the funding of new or existing businesses – largely in order to provide jobs, and to counter the effects of de-industrialisation – and wholly the Left which took authorities into the very active promotion of civil, racial and sexual rights. Insofar as there has been political innovation within the local authority service provision, it has come from the Left: though that wave of innovation has now clearly at least stalled – in part because it has met a good deal of popular hostility, in part because it can no longer be afforded.

We have noted in passing that the crisis which afflicts the public sector *did* receive a response from the Left: that response came in the form of

municipal new leftism. Elected to many councils in the 70s, this strand claimed to represent a new broom, sweeping away the old Labour corruptions. But to what extent did they mark a radical break?

 n taking power, many of the new groups discarded or ignored the experts in place: they took their instructions 'directly from the community'. But the community which informed them was in part their own creature: local government officers whom they had appointed to represent women, ethnic minority groups, community workers to whom they had given grants, trade union officials who worked in the town hall. And the people who were councillors in one borough were often officers in the next. In listening to the community, they forgot they were listening to their own voice. If old-style social democracy bestowed problems on people, the new Left projected their own problems on to shadows of people.

In this sense it was less a break with past practice than a distortion and amplification of it. Perceiving that the working class, especially in cities, was fragmenting, the new Left constituted a new series of groupings which it then attempted to strike much the same set of relations as its predecessors had with their electoral base.

The closed world of the town hall and the community centre created a mutually-reinforcing circle of minority representatives, police monitoring groups, political committees and community leaders. A peculiar idealism pervaded their thinking: words, names, labels became much more important than actions or the material change of concrete achievement. Brecht's remark that 'progress was about moving forward, not just being progressive', was turned on its head.

It is now said – now that some of the impetus for the town hall Left is running out and many members of it are themselves seeking correctives to courses they had earlier charted – that this strand of politics produced more documents than changes and that they were saved from doing real damage by bureaucrats who kept the show more or less on the road. There is much in this: certainly, many of the ILEA's initiatives in anti-racism and anti-sexism did not reach the schools – though they did have a profound effect on Fleet Street. But to take this line is to undervalue the movement in two ways.

First, it discounts its few achievements. The most obvious of these was to identify the limits of social-democratic provision, to call attention to the break-up of a homogeneous working-class base which accepted and benefited from homogeneous policies, and in some areas, to throw up useful innovations and ideas – such as contract compliance sanctions to promote equal opportunities in supplier companies, or experiments (in the case of the Greater London Enterprise Board,

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'The fundamental flaw of social-democratic relationships has been their one way dimension'



largely unsuccessful ones) with local employment initiatives.

Second, the movement was seen and is still seen in some quarters as 'true' socialism, as against the more timid version of it practised by the Labour leadership. A full account of the town hall Left still has to be written: but it is already clear that it has largely been a failure. In identifying cardboard villains (as the police, for example) and in elevating ethnic and sexual minorities to the beatification of victimhood; in indulging in gestures of defiance which were bound to collapse from lack of public support, it evaded rather than faced the issues confronting it – both those of the government's making and those of its own. It has left little in the way of a legacy: and the direction in most Labour-controlled town halls is now rightwards.

The adoption of a radical agenda by some Labour authorities, especially in London, was not generally the *prime* cause of the alienation of working-class support, where that has happened. The process was much more complex. Among some groups support was increased – not surprisingly, since they were the beneficiaries of the new politics. Those alienated were generally those who *already* had a large scepticism over locally-provided services, and saw the sponsorship of minority groups as simply an added aggravation, one in which they had no say.

It is closer to the mark that the radical left agendas were bolted on to a machine which had already run down. Inefficiency and delay had become endemic to many public services: these flowed from a lack of direction, of strategy, of discipline and of internal cohesion – overarching all of these, a lack of public support and involvement. This, the greatest lack, to an extent explains the others: for where the object of the services is treated merely as a passive recipient, then the dynamic relationships will tend to be confined to the service providers. The awful warning of the potential for decay in such relationships was found in the case of the Nye Bevan lodge, in Southwark, where local politicians, administrators and union officials either actively or passively conspired to deprive poor and elderly people of their remaining dignity.

We have said that a fundamental flaw of the social-democratic relationships adumbrated since the war has been their *one way* dimension: that is, that there was little reciprocity in these relationships. We propose, therefore, the elaboration of a public contract between public provision and its institutions on the one hand, and the people on the other. This contract, which we hope will be the subject of debate and development, would be composed of a network of *rights* and *duties*. It would have a number of

features, and would exist within a certain set of explicit assumptions.

First, that the 'output' of public services be subject to measurable criteria and judged, at least in part, according to these criteria. This would counteract the increasing tendency to import extraneous yardsticks which divert attention away from real falling standards. For example: the police argue that they have contained increasing community tension; that they are subject to increasingly violent attacks; and that the structures of society, especially the family, are breaking down and imposing larger demands upon them. All of these are or may be true: yet the fact remains that the clear-up rate of crime has fallen by 1% per year for the past decade while police resources have risen.

This is not to deny the obvious fact that education, social services, policing and other sectors cannot possibly be regarded as being wholly self-contained, occupying their own discrete worlds. It is to assert that if they continually pass the bucks to and fro among each other, or between themselves and 'the family' or 'the media' or 'society', then any efforts to determine the possible solutions to problems fail at the early level of measurability.

Criteria for performances are, of course, presently used by public authorities. But they tend to be internal, and opaque. We argue for criteria which are published and made widely available: and which are the result of the most extensive consultation – including polling – and dialogue between local representatives, officials and the public. If they are to challenge the hegemony of the market, public authorities must be at least as concerned as private companies to discover what people want. They have, or should have, a large advantage over private companies: that of providing people with a democratic redress against inefficiency and poor performance. But they must provide their electorates with clear yardsticks of the performance they have the right to expect first.

Second, we must recognise the concept of *merit*. It should be recognised – for some on the Left, rehabilitated – in a number of ways. In the first place, it must function as a crucial criterion in education: too often, especially in inner-city schools, it has been tacitly or overtly abandoned in favour of a pseudo-egalitarianism which levels down. It must be accepted that there will be inequities in performance, but that meritocratic performance is the goal. Naturally, some will need more help – the application of more resources – in order to assist achievement.

In the second place, it must function as the main criterion in the performance of public service itself: that is, that those who provide the services – especially the managers and administrators – must be promoted and re-

warded for the attainment of targets which are measured on the quality and/or quantity of service provided. Managers in the private sector are, in general, rewarded on the basis of profits achieved: it is no less important in the public sphere that rewards should be based on firm criteria – but that these are the satisfaction of *needs*, rather than the attainment of profits. Once again, of course, the practice of promoting on merit, or recognising merit and of relying on those who demonstrate merit is not absent in the public sphere. But it is often underplayed, even distrusted. This attitude springs, in part, from the lack of adequate criteria: once these are agreed and set, the attainment of them is to a very large extent the measurement of merit.

Third, and most important in this context, we need to be concerned to create the basis for a reciprocal relationship or set of relationships. This is the most critical because, while measurement of output and the concept of merit in attainment must be assumed, these will reproduce the failures of former social democratic provision if they do not meet a response from 'below'.

The government claims it is stimulating such a response. But that is wrong. The government uses the market as a solvent for most social problems. Dominant within this view is the individual as consumer – informed, involved, able to make choices. But in the case of the public services this is not the case.

The case of education offers a clear example. Central to the government's proposals are the twin goals of increasing the autonomy of school headteachers; and increasing the scope for parental influence over the schools to which they send their children. Implicit in this approach is the possibility – even, probability – that those schools which operate in the way the government hopes and expects will demand even greater independence from national criteria and guidelines – and, crucially, demand local independence in fixing pay and conditions, presently governed nationally.

There are some attractions in this approach: the most obvious is the greater involvement of parents. Further, more power to the headteacher is not simply a Conservative theme: the present ILEA leadership has also criticised its own past practices of regarding headmasters as a transmission belt for centrally-decided objectives and strategies, and has proposed more local independence and higher rewards. On these two broad issues, it is likely we have a rough political consensus – which is likely to be a good thing for children.

However, the Tory proposals fall too short: and by being governed by the market, they have imported ideological criteria which will impede, even des-

tro, the objectives to which they are publicly committed – leading to reasonable speculation that their real objectives are somewhat different.

First, the government has not sought to revive the idea of, and support for, education for all. Instead, it administers the inheritance of a system designed to attain that (though it never did live up to the promise of the rhetoric) while focusing almost entirely on the shortcomings of the comprehensive system. That these shortcomings are many there is no doubt: but that an antidote which promotes centres of excellence, or magnet schools, will leave behind legions of schoolchildren does not seem capable of refutation either. Improvements in schools have to take place within an explicitly articulated framework of support for a popular education system which is the centrepiece of a future government: a system which addresses both the ambitions of parents and their children and the needs of a technically restructured economy.

Second, a market in education merely confirms and deepens the existing divisions and disadvantages. At the expensive end of the education market – the big ‘public’ schools – parents do not need to become involved because they are, largely, of a cultural whole with the ethos of the school. Everyone knows what is to be done: the parents’ place in life is to be at least passed on, if

not improved. Given large resources, the disorientation which sets in when a child is taken from home, and the network of largely implicit shared assumptions, values and beliefs, the technical task is not very hard.

At the inner-city end, the task appears almost impossible. The social dislocations have helped create families with only one parent; or parents who are themselves ill-educated; and/or parents whose own financial problems press so hard upon them as to allow little time for participation. Comparing these two extremes – public school and inner-city – is to obtain a vivid picture of the most resources being available for those who need them least.

To empower these latter schools’ headmasters and parents to improve their schools will take preparation. If we are to give rights and ask for the exercise of responsibilities, we must ensure that the actual performance is not a mockery of the aims. To achieve a real involvement and real reciprocity in the public sphere, people must be educated, trained and encouraged to exercise the duties of citizenship. That aim will involve the creation of new structures, publicly-funded and voluntary, which begins the construction of what we need: local institutions of the public sphere which are the possession of all – not of the bureaucrat or the activist.

‘It is already clear that the town hall Left has largely been a failure’



The duties of citizenship have to go beyond the payment of taxes. The striking of a new social-democratic relationship, where the impulse comes from below and above, can’t be done either by fiat or by the insertion of the market, or the present combination of both. Nor can it be achieved by the simple application of money. The task facing opposition parties on the lookout for a ‘post-Thatcherite’ politics is only in part a matter of ‘coming up with new ideas’ (since, apart from anything else, there are quite a lot of good old ideas – as the Right found when they embarked on their intellectual binge of the 70s). The other part of the task is developing a practice of politics which gives democratic principles flesh: which breaks at once the alienation of the populace from the political process and dethrones the obtrusive activist – or, rather, transforms that figure into a facilitator of involvement rather than a proxy for it.

The core idea we seek to present is *the reconstruction of a civic culture*: one founded securely on an extension of citizens’ rights and responsibilities. The Left’s traditions in this, which have seen some considerable achievements, have decayed in many instances: we have a government which has taken full advantage of that decay to lop off branches and attack the root of the tradition. The re-energising of the civic culture is among the most important tasks facing the opposition. ●

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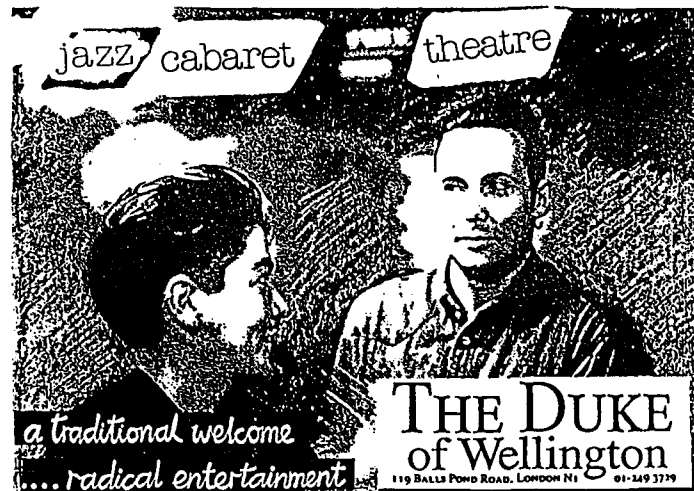


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Green Alert

Green politics continues to gain momentum in the UK and across the world. Its appeal crosses different classes and cultures and projects a widely acceptable image. At the same time it shakes the ground of established politics based on a traditional view of industrial and economic progress. These tremors are also felt within socialist politics whose agenda has been largely shaped by industrialism and advocacy of material advance. The rise of the green phenomenon offers a refreshing challenge both to the political mainstream and to the Left.

The growth of environmentalism as a popular movement arises both from the shock of the global threats to which it seeks to respond and from the power of planetary purpose that it espouses. The threats continue to shape the awareness of us all. Chernobyl shockingly turned the abstract mathematics of rare risks into a real radiation catastrophe whose invisible cloud respected no national boundaries. Suddenly the safety of the Sunday roast on British dinner tables was tied to the inadequacies of Soviet nuclear reactor design and management. The dramatic discovery of a hole in the ozone layer threw a public spotlight onto what had previously been an arcane dispute about the chemistry of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). The everyday aerosol can was abruptly implicated in the integrity of the stratosphere and its global

Prolonged drought in the American Midwest has unleashed a new wave of speculation and concern about global warming, the result of the 'greenhouse effect'. Putting international environmental issues at the heart of the political agenda, predictions about fundamental changes in the earth's climate have led to inconclusive debate and confusion. Introducing this special survey, Fred Steward examines the growing significance of green politics and argues that current threats to the environment are forging a new internationalism, which presents a challenge to the socialist tradition

effects. The devastating drought in the US Midwest gives a hint of the vulnerability of food supplies even in the well-fed developed world to climatic changes such as the 'greenhouse effect', which was given worldwide attention at the recent Toronto conference.

These events in themselves have a material impact on public awareness but this is politically magnified by the role of the environmental movement itself. The risks of nuclear power and of CFCs had both been raised by environmentalists for more than a decade before the recent disasters, yet had been marginalised by mainstream politics. These 'early warnings' sensitised public perception of these disasters and gave an enormous boost to green credibility. The growth of the greens cannot, however, simply be ascribed to a talent for prescience.

The green appeal embraces a

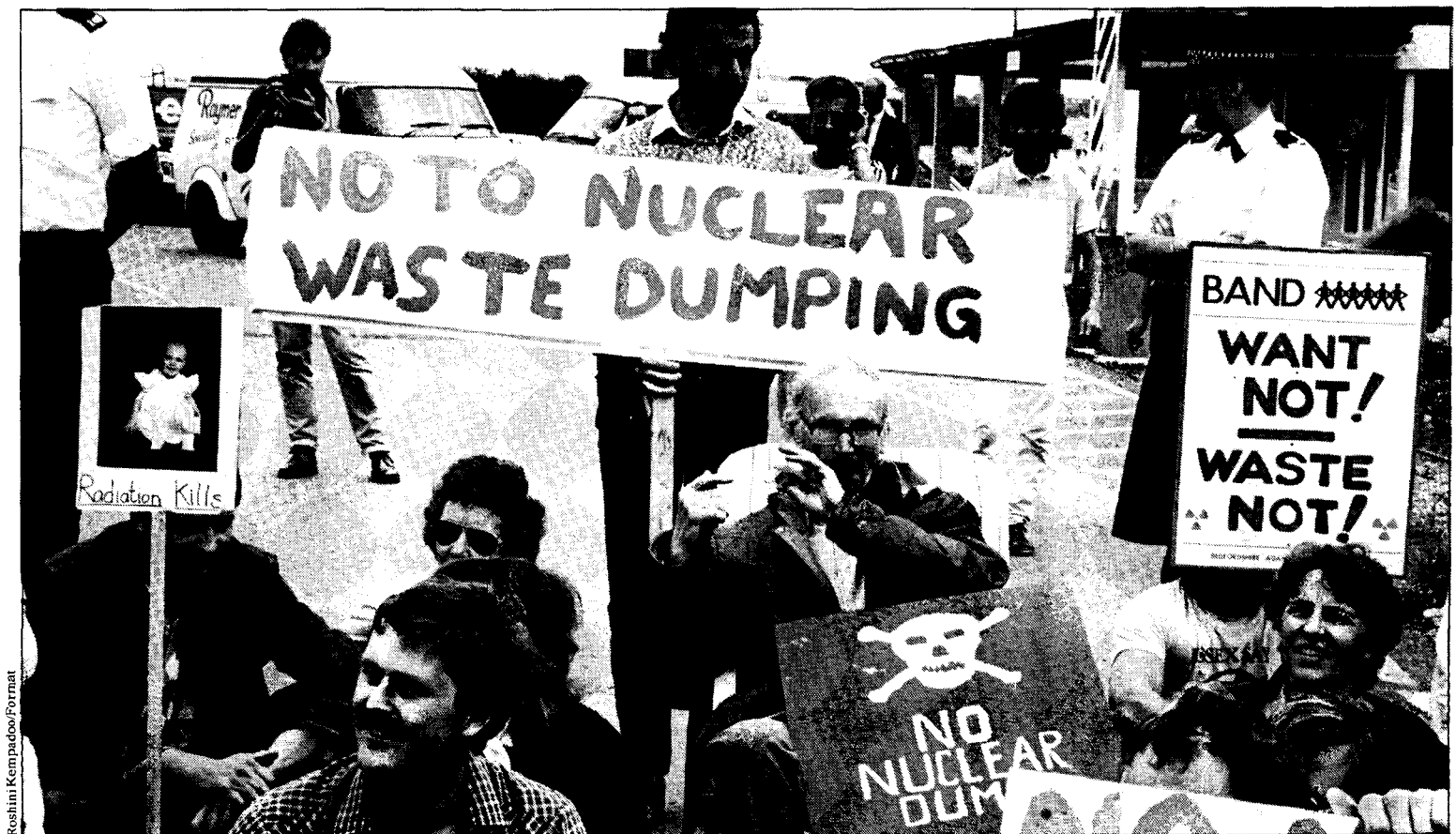
positive moral and social vision in an epoch when materialism and individualism largely shape the official political agenda. This vision puts the broad themes of the quality of life and the integrity of nature centre-stage. The moral appeal remains its great strength but its expression has changed in two decades from an ineffectual moralism to an influential politics. There are three elements which have contributed to this change.

The first is the emergence of a new international environmental activism. It combines sophisticated pressure-group politics on particular issues with the espousal of a clear world view. Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace are its foremost exponents. They are constituted as international organisations; action is directed at international forums dealing with acid rain and CFCs. It is an international

politics from below which stands in marked contrast to the bureaucratic nature of most international organisations. It is conspicuous as the only contemporary example of successful collaboration in the international arena.

The second has been the role of the mass media in focusing attention on these issues. This has been a vital mechanism for giving substance to issues which, while touching people deeply, are often beyond most individuals' direct experience or comprehension. The Tasmanian ecosystem and the tropical rainforests would arouse far less concern but for the passions of the two Davids: Bellamy and Attenborough. TV coverage has shifted from moral anguish to political punch. The long, pompous 'state of the planet' despair-inducing feature has given way to sharp current affairs coverage either as part of general programmes like *Panorama* or *World in Action* or series such as Michael Buerk's *Nature*. This is green politics moving from the margins to the mainstream.

The third novel feature has been the emergence of green parties and in some countries such as West Germany, actual parliamentary representation. The significance of this is two-fold. On the one hand the transition from pressure group to party is about moving from indirect to direct forms of political influence. On the other hand it indicates a breadth and coherence of philosophy cap-



Kishini Kempadoo/Format

Down on the dumps: Elstow residents refuse nuclear waste