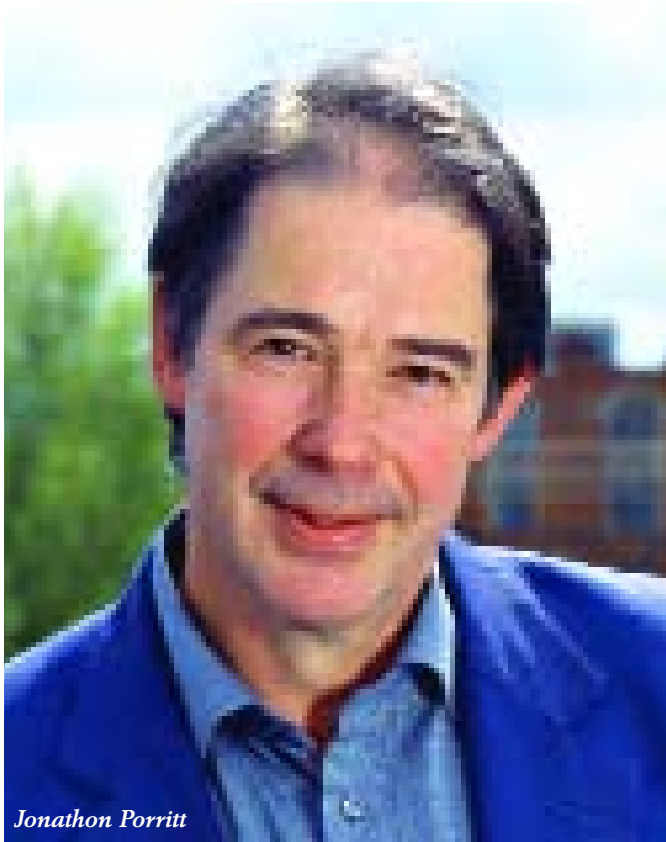


# Hodgson's Choice

## It's all on the label ...



Jonathon Porritt

*Green Party, Friends of the Earth, committed environmentalist and founder of Forum for the Future: we know all about Jonathon Porritt, don't we? Simon Hodgson found out that he didn't quite.*

Jonathon Porritt laughs a lot. He laughs when we discuss the Sustainable Development Commission. He even laughs when we talk about Friends of the Earth. For some reason this is not quite what I expected from the ever-present thorn in the side of government and big business. Watching Porritt from the sidelines, listening to media soundbites and reading articles it would be easy to build a picture of the UK's nagger in chief: a man for whom no step forward is ever big enough. Not a man with a sense of humour, you might think. But you'd be wrong. And I discovered during our meeting that there are lots of things I didn't know about Jonathon Porritt.

For example – he attributes some of his success to Margaret Thatcher. "I joined Friends of the Earth at a distinct trough" he says. "I arrived in 1984 at a bad time in Friends of the Earth's history. It had lost its way a bit and spent a shed-load of money on the Sizewell B enquiry, when it really didn't have any money to do that". In charge of an almost-bankrupt NGO with falling membership, he needed some outside help. And he got it from a very unlikely quarter. "The Prime Minister suddenly cottoned on to the horrors of climate change and began to realize that 'environment' was part of the deal for her as a world leader. She gave a sequence of speeches in 1987 and 1988 which utterly astonished people in the political establishment, because they

were coming from such an improbable source, and galvanized the media."

Porritt's view is that FoE is an organization whose fortunes exactly follow those of the wider green movement. When awareness is high and the topic is debated, FoE's membership and finances are healthy. When there is a dip, FoE follows it down. Thatcher's intervention in the mid-eighties led to serious media interest and big national debates on the issues of the day: acid rain, the nuclear industry and the future of the rainforests. Membership rose, the finances improved and it was a "fantastic time to be involved in FoE".

I also have the wrong title. "I've never described myself as an environmentalist", he avers when I suggest the term. "What got me into this whole area - our relationship with the natural world - was not really driven by conventional environmental and conservation issues. For me it's always been as much about social justice and equity. Sustainable development has been a huge liberation for me, enabling me to pursue environmental issues within a broader context, which is as much about people as it is the planet."

This interest came from an unlikely source: Porritt started his career by teaching in an inner-city comprehensive. "It was pretty grisly", he admits "The majority of the kids came from an area of very deprived housing and it was for me an extraordinary experience to see what a totally disadvantaged urban background could do to children". As a response to his developing awareness of social justice and equity, he began to lead exploratory extra-curricular visits to farms and the countryside, making connections that today would be considered 'environmental education'. Porritt looked around for a political outlet for these concerns and lighted on the newly formed Ecology Party (now the Green Party), joining it in 1974. He later became co-chair of the Greens.

**"...the UK's nagger in chief: a man for whom no step forward is ever big enough"**

The shock of the school environment was intensified by the contrast with Porritt's own background, which he candidly describes as 'privileged'. A happy childhood led via Eton to Oxford (where he studied French and German) and a "failed attempt to become a lawyer". Not the background one might expect, and not conventionally useful: he wishes now that he had done Biology and Chemistry. "I've always had to work

incredibly hard as a non-scientist to keep on top of the science of this stuff.”

But his upbringing has come in handy, albeit in a surprising way: I ask him whether he isn't at some risk of being compromised by becoming an insider. Does his role as Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission mean that he has now been 'captured' by the establishment? There is an uncharacteristic pause before he answers: "Possibly, I'm very alert to the risk. The odd thing for me is that it's never been terribly attractive. Having had a fortunate start in life none of that stuff holds any magic for me at all. I'm not attracted to the establishment, I'm not seduced by it, I've spent much of my life trying to get away from it rather than trying to get into it, so now that I'm a little bit more connected to it, I treat it with the scepticism that it deserves".

Even the title of the Commission's recent assessment of the Blair Government's record, "Shows promise. But must try harder", suggests his scepticism remains undimmed. The media coverage accompanying the Report's release focussed on the challenges it issued to its sponsors, rather than any praise it might contain. Porritt's role as nagger in chief seems to be uncompromised.

Among the twenty challenges in the "Shows promise ..." report, is a call for Government to strengthen its adopted Principles for Sustainable Development, particularly with regard to equity. Isn't inequity in some way fundamental to a capitalist economy? Doesn't the desire to have what others

have drive wealth creation? Porritt answers the question with reference to a Forum for the Future study. Forum is investigating which parts of capitalism are compatible with the objective of sustainable development or whether there are fundamental conflicts between the two. And the conclusion? "You can't have a capitalist system without inequity: that's not possible." However, he goes on to qualify that statement: "What you can have is a system that minimizes the inequity and the impact of it, whereas the current model exacerbates the differences".

So he is still thinking about social justice. In many ways, nothing has changed since those early days in a West London comprehensive. "This may be self deception, but to me the core of ideas and beliefs that got me into this in the first place remain almost entirely the same" he explains. "I'm still a member of the Green Party. There isn't any other political party I would join and I've never voted for any other party in my life." So perhaps I don't have to unlearn all I know about Jonathon Porritt. Exploring his background and motivations has been interesting, but fundamentally, I conclude what you see is what you get. Porritt agrees. "It's all on the label" he laughs.

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