

Discussion paper – not for publication

Polarisation and the radical right: Strategic challenges for the environmental movement

International context

Politics globally has seen a dramatic shift in the past decade. The globalised, liberal international order has been challenged by a rise in authoritarianism, nationalism and a collapse in international norms, personified by the increasingly radical Trump administration. Established parties of both the centre-left and centre-right have faced existential threats; in the case of the political right, this has typically been the transformation or replacement of mainstream conservatism by more radical forces.

Anti-environmentalism is central to the worldview of the radical right. At an EU level, this has led to successful attacks on environmental policy ambition – but has gone further, with attempts to delegitimise eNGOs as political actors and even to defund their operations. This approach has gone further again in countries such as Hungary and the USA, where the space for civic society to influence policy has been eroded.

Scottish and UK context

In both Scotland and the UK the previously existing consensus on climate action has ended. More widely, opinion polling indicates a collapse in trust in the political system and in mainstream parties. It is widely expected that Reform could form the next UK government and it is plausible that they form the second largest political group in Scotland following May's election.

The issues identified in this paper are not specific to any single party. The Conservatives today share a similar worldview and approach as Reform; the Labour government have repeatedly attacked environmental protections and described eNGOs as “blockers”; and the SNP have retreated from their previous level of ambition on environmental policy, and, particularly in relation to oil and gas, may drift further.

Structural challenges

The environment in which eNGOs and civic society have learned to operate is changing. Our operating model assumes that we can make policy gains through evidence-based insider advocacy supported by public campaigns which involve the soft mobilisation of our supporters. There is a chance that this model may no longer work – at least, it may not work as effectively.

We face a number of structural challenges in addressing this:

- Our requirements under charity law to remain politically neutral limit our ability to manoeuvre in the face of outright hostility (though political neutrality remains a positive for our organisations);
- We are liable to be led by funder priorities, which may not reflect our needs or the realities of a changing political context;
- The collapse of mainstream media influence – and the loss of a shared online space – pose fundamental challenges in how we influence public discourse and reach decision-makers;

- The nature and structure of our organisations make it hard to build or join a progressive “big tent” ecosystem, as the radical right have successfully built;
- Our organisational risk appetite – rightfully shaped by our membership, our governance structures, and our delivery priorities – may cause us to react too slowly or limit proactive change.

Longer-term and immediate risks

We should not assume that “it could never happen here”. The opponents of environmental action are well-funded, opportunistic, and determined to disrupt progress. The political dynamics of the current moment are opening opportunities to delay and dilute action on climate and nature.

The risks to our sector include:

- Nature conservation being co-opted by bad-faith actors to oppose climate action – which in turn poses reputational risks to our organisations and division amongst our supporters;
- Increased politicisation of government action and funding, reducing willingness of Ministers/agencies to act;
- Attacks on public funding for eNGOs and the legitimacy of our role as stakeholders;
- Lower salience for the environment as our issues are squeezed out of media and increasingly polarised in political debate;
- A shrinking public sphere and decreased role for civic society.

Issues for consideration

1. What is our strategy to increase the salience of climate and nature as a political issue, which has been in decline since the pandemic?

Do we have the infrastructure to deliver this strategy? This is fundamentally not a *messaging* issue – the public agree with us, at least at a high level.

2. Do we have leverage over the government and politicians who oppose environmental action? Are we prepared to use that leverage? Are we willing to “pick a fight”? If not – what is the alternative?

How do we create a political cost for opposition to environmental action?

3. Are we equipped to deal with a media environment in which we, or our issues, are under attack?

We know that responding after the fact doesn’t work – what is stopping us from shaping the debate on our terms? Do we understand the “attention economy”?

4. Are we interested in building a counterbalance to the radical right – even if that means a “big tent” approach that deprioritises some of our issues?

On a small scale – where is the progressive news/politics podcast covering Holyrood

and reaching political insiders? Where are the digital channels covering Scottish issues? Can this infrastructure be built – if so, by who?

5. What is our approach to engaging with politicians who are explicit in opposing our core values – when, why, and how do we do this?
6. How do we respond to attacks on our funding or legitimacy? How do we prevent this from distracting from our core work?

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