

27 November 1989

Page A
A

JONATHON PORRITT

I went to see Jonathon Porritt the other day. You may find the following useful as background for the Prime Minister's meeting with him on 1 December.

In general I found his views fairly reasonable. I think he may have been consciously distancing himself a little from some of the positions taken up by Friends of the Earth for example, on nuclear power.

The areas in which he is particularly interested are:

- the White Paper on the Environment (as an expression of the Government's attitude across the board)
- energy policy (where he would like more investment in renewable sources)
- recycling (where Friends of the Earth have taken some useful initiatives)
- agriculture and the countryside (where he would like to see a considerable expansion of Environmentally Sensitive Areas).

White Paper on the Environment

This has aroused great expectations. Chris Patten is acutely conscious that warmed up existing policies will not do. But he recognises the difficulty of getting agreement from colleagues to new approaches. Transport policy is likely to be the most controversial area.

Jonathon Porritt seems encouraged at the level of serious interest in Whitehall. (You are launching work on the White Paper at a MISC 141 meeting on 7 December, and two groups of economists are already beavering away under Treasury leadership.) He is likely to argue for a major shift of emphasis within Whitehall, with a powerful and proactive secretariat in the Cabinet Office ensuring that environmental considerations are fully weighed in all policy decisions. The very process of "weighing" will require values to be put on the environment. This in itself will be a major task.

Energy policy

Friends of the Earth feel vindicated by the decision not to privatise the nuclear side of the CEBG. They claim to have been arguing for years that the costs of nuclear energy were higher than anyone would admit. As an organisation, Friends of the Earth represent people who think that nuclear power is evil, and should not be used in any circumstances.

This is not Jonathon Porritt's position. He thinks that the present methods of using nuclear power are seriously flawed, and present too great a risk to man and his environment. But he does not rule out the possibility that in future scientists will discover ways of using nuclear power which carry fewer risks.

Meanwhile he would like to see investment in renewable sources of energy, such as wave power. Since these will not be profitable at the initial stages of development, this would require a strategic decision and some public money.

Recycling

Friends of the Earth have been campaigning for recycling, and are running a recycling city project in Sheffield funded

by the Department of the Environment. Jonathon Porritt believes that we still have a long way to go in changing attitudes to recycling (and litter) in the UK. We lag behind the rest of Europe in terms of attitudes.

This may well be a fruitful area for discussion with the Prime Minister. Chris Patten has just proposed giving recycling a prominent part in the Government's proposals on waste management in the Green Bill.

Agriculture and Countryside

Jonathon Porritt is critical of set-aside, which he sees as bringing little or no environmental benefit, but is enthusiastic about Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs). At present these are limited to 120,000 hectares in areas such as the Somerset Levels, Norfolk Broads, Pennine Dales etc. The annual cost of the ESA scheme is £8.4 million.

A substantial expansion of ESAs would be popular with environmental groups and with the Country Landowners' Association. It is likely to be popular with the run of farmers if the take up in the existing eligible areas is anything to go by.

But like other incentives to farm extensively, ESAs are not an instant remedy for the ills caused by intensive farming. In some cases these require heavy investment to restore the countryside/earth to the state it would have been in if intensive farming had never occurred.

ESAs require further evaluation in terms of environmental value for money. So far they are not a "proven" panacea. But their likely value justifies some extension. Such a move would go down well with both farmers and environmentalists.


CAROLYN SINCLAIR