PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND THE POLITICS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Once, environmentalists called for new public virtues, now they call rather for better managerial strategies. Once, they advocated more democracy and local self-reliance, now they tend to support the global empowerment of governments, corporations and science. Once, they strove for cultural diversity, now they see little choice but to push for a worldwide rationalisation of life-styles. Indeed, as ecological issues have moved to the top of the agenda of international politics, environmentalism appears in many cases to have lost the spirit of contention, limiting itself to the provision of survival strategies for the powers that be. As a result, in recent years a discourse of global ecology has developed that is largely devoid of any consideration of power relations, cultural authenticity and moral choice; instead, it rather promotes the aspirations of a rising eco-cracy to manage nature and regulate people worldwide. Ironically, a movement which once invited people to humility has produced experts who succumb to the temptation of hubris (Sachs, 1993:xv).

INTRODUCTION

The first purpose of this article is to provide a perspective on environmentalism which, while grounded in the Australian environmental/political context, may also have relevance to the South African context. We are aware that in South Africa supplanting of one political dispensation with another brings the opportunity - and perhaps the responsibility - to problematise former intellectual traditions. Theory and practice in South Africa, as elsewhere, are properly politicised. The situation in Australia is clearly different from South Africa, yet a case can be made in both countries that environmentalism and environmental policy-making are political and that this ought to be recognised in the field of environmental education. In considering this, we are reminded of the recommendations about environmental education tabled at the International Forum of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) which forms part of the Treaty on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility:

> Environmental education should be grounded in critical and innovative thinking in any place or time, promoting the transformation and reconstruction of society. Environmental education is not neutral but is values based. It is an act for social transformation (NGO's International Forum, 1992:1-2).

The second purpose of this article is to demonstrate the political nature of environmentalism within Australia and some of the influences that shape environmental policy. The article considers the way the media both reflect and shape the politicisation of environmentalism. It also considers some of the limits and constraints on public participation in environmental debates, including the role of government. As environmentalism has

become located within political discourses in Australia it has come to serve the parochial interests of government and other organisations. This has been accompanied by some of the 'cultural components' of government bureaucracies - for example the language of management and regulation of both people and nature (Sachs, 1993:xv, xvii). We argue that in the field of environmentalism there remains a place for arguments (and the language of their original expression) whose main interest is with 'power relations, cultural authenticity and moral choice' (Sachs, 1993:xvii). We also argue that environmental education has a role in encouraging such public participation in environmental debates.

THE POLITICS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM: SOME EXAMPLES FROM THE MEDIA

In this section, we provide examples of the 'politics of environmentalism', and of the role of the media in the process of politicisation.

Grose, a journalist with the *Canberra Times* newspaper, believes that debate in Australia "is unique in the world for its self-critical passion" (1995:10). Environmental debate in general in Australia has tended to focus on both wilderness issues as well as human survival considerations. Doyle & Kellow argue, however, that the environment movement in Australia has predominantly had a wilderness focus and that this focus "has had a profound influence in shaping environmental politics and policy" (Doyle & Kellow, 1995:10). Nevertheless, the public outcry in Australia over the resumption of French nuclear testing in the Pacific appeared to be, in the main, not on the grounds of concerns for the natural environment

but rather a response to the arrogance of the French in undertaking such an exercise in 'our' backyard where the health of Australians and other Pacific populations may ultimately suffer. For example, car-stickers were produced declaring a ban on the purchasing of French products, yet no such outcry has been heard in response to China's nuclear testing. The following examples drawn from Australian newspapers further demonstrate this human survival focus:

> Radioactive wastes are likely to pose serious exposure risks long after the 10,000 years for which the US government now calculates risk standards. Adequate risk standards are possible but they "should be designed to protect individuals in the immediate vicinity of the facility" (*The Mercury (Tasmania)*, 3 August 1995:15).

> Radioactive fallout from French nuclear tests in the South Pacific has been settling in Perth since the early 1970's, says Western Australian physicist Bruce Hartley. "Those near the bomb sites would have been breathing in higher concentrations that could have been fatal, but we have no data to confirm it", Dr Hartley [said], "Only the French know" (*West Australian*, 19 August 1995:7).

> Several hundred Polynesians had been killed from French nuclear tests, says scientist and author Bengt Danielsson. He said that his daughter, Marouia, who died from cancer in 1972, was one of them (*Sunday Mail (Queensland)*, 9 July 1995:18).

The wilderness focus in Australia, as demonstrated by attempts in Tasmania to flood wilderness areas for hydro-electricity generation, could have emerged because of demographic and historical factors (Doyle & Kellow, 1995:9). Australia has large areas of wilderness and the agenda of environmental groups such as the Wilderness Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation has focused on the preservation of remaining wilderness. These groups have wedded their agenda to political debate, yet this does not mean that the majority of Australians share this concern.

A belief in the worth of wilderness ostensibly requires an environmental ethic which holds that non-human beings have intrinsic value (O'Neill, 1992:119). This value underscores a non-instrumentalist rather than an objectified view of the environment - the environment cannot be perceived by humans in any way other than through a subjective framework. This belief is at odds with much of the rhetoric espoused by the Australian government, and portrayed by the media.

Grose's report (part of which is quoted above) on the 1995 United Nations Summit on Global Warming in Berlin compares briefly the level of debate within Australia with that of the United States of America. Grose implies that public debate in America does not exist on the same level at which it exists in Australia. He puts this down to Australia's 'self-critical passion on this issue'. We suspect, however, that this debate and this 'passion' has not emerged in the main from environmental concerns but, rather, exists because of the cultural context of Australia. Perhaps this provides some explanation for the response by many Australians to French nuclear testing in the Pacific, as described above, and reveals, to some extent, a link between the way we respond to and know the natural environment and what we know and believe about our culture (Ross, 1994:15).

Kelly (an art critic), in his article 'The Fine Art of Slagging', discusses this issue of debate in Australia with reference to art and Australian culture in general:

> In a recent column in *The Australian* (October 7-8, 1995) Mr Giles Auty, the resident art critic for that publication, threw down the gauntlet by suggesting that a thorough and vigorous debate in the public sphere was required if Australia is to develop 'a genuine and representative, rather than *ersatz*, culture'. Mr Auty remarks that since coming to Australia from England he has witnessed a greater propensity for the resort to abuse, 'from senior politicians downwards', as a means of public debate than for measured, informed discourse. He concludes with an invitation for those interested in such a project to 'step into territory in which an intelligent audience can differentiate between the theories on offer'. The vital importance of culture as a determining social force has been marginalised for too long in this country, obscured in recent years by the opacity of the often impenetrable language of post-modernist theoretical discourse, and nudged aside by the infectious, insipid reductionism of economic rationalism (Kelly, 1995:3).

The obfuscation inherent in post modernist discourses subdues debate rather than encourage improvement and clarification through inclusive deliberations and contestation. Consider also the following observation by Donmoyer in the *Educational Researcher* (1996:21):

> Some French postmodern scholars in recent

years have also attempted quite consciously to rhetorically undermine the authority of their own texts. Their assumption is that all texts - including postmodern ones - are polemics; it is just that some polemics - particularly those that masquerade as scholarship - are more cleverly disguised than others. Readers, they believe, must constantly be alerted to this fact so that they are not seduced by the apparent persuasiveness of an author's argument. One frequently used tactic: employ a discourse style that is intentionally opaque. Needless to say, such a rhetorical move serves to reinforce analytically oriented scholars' perception that Continental scholarship is characterised by confusion and obfuscation.

The 'reductionism of economic rationalism' is prevalent in environmental debates in Australia. These debates are consistently reduced into an oppositional 'environment versus economics' dichotomy, for example 'ecology versus jobs'; or debates are presented in a way that raise the question: How much is it worth? (Bruner & Oelschlaeger, 1994:391). *The Age* newspaper (17 October 1995:10) began an article about global warming with the following: "If the world's climate is warming because of the burning of fossil fuels, how much will it cost to fix the problem? And is the fix worth the cost?"

And in the same newspaper on 15 October 1995 (13):
Attempts by the Government, industry and green groups to reach agreement over Australia's diminishing forest reserves are based on a 'woefully inadequate' system of measuring their true value, a leading environmental economist has claimed.

Bruner & Oelschlaeger caution that "if environmental issues are conceptualised in terms of 'owls versus people', then the owls (and the habitat that sustains them) do not have much of a future" (1994:391). They view this conceptualisation as a 'false dichotomy' and assert that if this is how arguments are advanced then this is how the public will more than likely perceive issues.

Mercer also views the 'economy versus the environment' debate as a false dichotomy on the grounds "that it is in the long-term interests of the 'economy' to pay much closer attention to the health of the environment" (Mercer, 1995:40). Mercer's 'false dichotomy', however, leaves unquestioned the very economic structure under which we currently function.

O'Neill, an Australian journalist, argues that the quasi-religious fervour of environmentalist conviction has reduced the level of debate over the environment to a clash of good and evil, and led to exaggeration and distortion often accepted uncritically by the media, government departments and politicians (*Sydney Morning Herald,* 20 January 1996, sect. 6:1). O'Neill calls this 'the politics of the big scare' which he believes possibly began in the late 1960's as a result of communications integrating international economies. Emerging now though, he believes, is "an increasing body of criticism about the methods and lack of intellectual rigour of the environmental movement". Regardless of what is considered right or wrong, O'Neill urges the Australian public to engage in a more sophisticated discussion about environmental issues.

Eccleston, a journalist and writer for *The Australian Magazine*, believes that through debate and disagreement, without condemnation, an awareness of issues is generated (1995:13). Contested concepts can only be made intelligible through debate, and thus debate has the potential to serve a strong educative function. The act of critical debate, like socially critical education, necessarily exposes differing viewpoints and contested philosophies. This approach, viewed as an educative process, is commensurate with Kemmis' 'members of society' view (Kemmis, 1983:3) which he describes within the context of formal education:

The members of society view the individual as a member of society and so it institutes collaborative values. It recognises that power comes not from the presumed right to dispose over other people's lives, nor from the confidence or competence of individuals, but from democratic organisation and common striving of groups towards justice and rationality.

A correlation can also be drawn between Robottom & Hart's description of socially critical environmental education and critical debate:

investigations should be socially critical in that they seek to uncover and make explicit the values and vested interests of the individuals and groups who adopt positions with respect to the issue. These investigations will be driven more by the nature of the unfolding issue itself than by a prior commitment to teaching a body of knowledge and skills. And it will exceed the development of empathy with the environment, to the point of actually engaging directly the individuals and groups whose actions would threaten the environment (Robottom & Hart, 1993:24).

According to Eccleston, Australians have become 'tight-lipped, hard-faced, and far too serious' and thus are limiting any potential for 'radical change'. He says that dissenters of popularly held views are

> prepared to question conventional wisdom and fashionable views. Sometimes for self-interest, more often for principle, they challenge our collective complacency. Whether they are right or not is irrelevant. The value of dissenters is in their refusal to accept that the rest of us know best. They at least force us to re-examine and justify our beliefs. Society, after all, is not based on a book of immutable principles, but something more akin to *Vogue* magazine (Eccleston, 1995:13).

Another Australian journalist, Farmer, states that the "education system trains young people for jobs, not independent thinking" (as quoted in Eccleston, 1995:15) and that:

> Education is no longer about ideas, what sort of person you are, what sort of society you live in. You just become concerned with economic worth - and the economic worth of a lot of things is nothing.

This issue is particularly pertinent in the light of recent government affirmation of vocational education and 'back-to-basics' perspectives in Australian education (see, for example, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September 1997:16).

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

We have provided several examples of media engagement in environmental issues, indeed the politicisation of environmentalism. It is reasonable to expect that media engagement in the politicisation of environmentalism might increase public interest and participation in environmental decision-making. However, government processes of policy generation can actually work against active participation in debate about environmental issues.

Within government, technical and scientific knowledge seems to be privileged over other ways of knowing. With the introduction of various types of evaluation and reporting, such as performance agreements, quality assurance, management plans and such initiatives as 'state of the environment' reporting, the requirement to predict and generalise outcomes, control processes and quantify results almost determines government directions. As House

(1993:viii) points out:

> Governments face serious problems in governing such an amorphous mass of people. No longer bolstered by traditional institutions, governments must find new ways of legitimising their actions. The main legitimation is to provide increasing material abundance for the population, but science is another basis for legitimising and informing government actions. Evaluation is scientific authority applied to practical decisions and actions, particularly public decisions and actions. Governments, increasingly large, centralised, and removed from contact with citizens, often appeal to scientific authority, and answering this appeal is a role that formal evaluation plays. It is no accident that formal evaluation began in the most advanced capitalist countries.

Yet, despite this onslaught of evaluation processes, decision-making in the Australian public sector remains an enigma.

The view is often expressed within government circles that the community is in fact given an adequate voice in public processes through representation on various decision-making committees, and through participation following media calls for public involvement or comment. David Robinson (1993:320) states that even a limited amount of "public involvement is criticised for causing delay, additional expense and for pandering to pressure groups". If changes are made to expand (or even control) public involvement it is difficult to see how the community can participate without extending deadlines and completely overhauling systems of working. Yet it is well known to bureaucrats that during consultation the same limited number of community groups and interested individuals tend to become involved over and over again. What we are claiming here is that governments often want to be seen as consulting the community, but without the attendant protraction of process this requires.

Bureaucrats appear to believe in maintaining the *status quo* and maintaining control of all decision-making processes rather than establishing mechanisms that support community generated change. This view is not unique to Australia. In Canada, Lindquist (1991:3) reports that the

> structure of policy communities is often inappropriate for overcoming current and emerging policy challenges [and] the parochial interests of government bureaus and organised interests often work against developing more beneficial policy responses.

Bureaucratic processes such as policy development and legislative operations apportion only a vague window of opportunity for broad community participation. Education is persistently tacked on to the end of such deliberations. Time-lines are always short, and often when initiatives are being developed the community is only able to become involved 'tokenistically'. Environmental education within such a process is used as a 'tool' to persuade the community to do as government policy determines - to tell the 'one true story' and to disseminate knowledge to practitioners. This was (and still is) education as creating social acceptance. Such views about education have been expressed repeatedly by government and community representatives alike.

In the field of environmental education, researchers have attempted to avoid the problem of 'lip-service community consultation' in community-based research in several ways; some of these might have relevance to the present discussion. For example, in a Canadian study, Hart, Robottom & Taylor (1994) worked with Yukon First Nations communities in a three year evaluation of a teacher education program. Characteristics of their study concerned with ensuring adequate participation and consultation were:
* consultation was protracted (over three years)
* consultation provided participants with a direct voice in the accounts
* consultation embraced all 'categories' of participants within the program being studied and the community within which it was embedded
* consultation valued story-telling and personal testimony
* reporting was iterative - accounts were developed progressively through negotiation with participants, and
* development of accounts was based on consultation, governed by a set of principles of procedure which protected the 'property rights' of the participants concerned. Release of written accounts was negotiated with participants on the criteria of relevance, fairness and accuracy. Release of accounts was staged through a set of 'audiences' comprising the various 'categories' of participants, starting with those concerned most directly with the contents of accounts (the actual interviewees, for example).

The overall purpose of these measures was to improve the extent to which control over the research agenda (and the processes of consultation through which the research w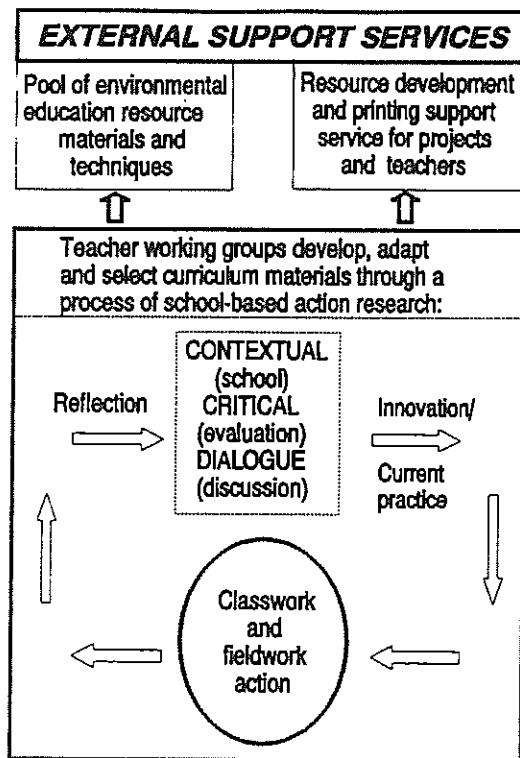as mediated and research accounts were validated) was as internal as possible - that control over the processes and outcomes of community consultation was in the hands of the community participants themselves (see Hart, Robottom & Taylor, 1994).

Especially in light of some recent policy statements (see for example NGO's International Forum, 1992), environmental education is one learning area with a mandate and perhaps responsibility to facilitate public participation in the politics of environmentalism. To authentically engage in environmental debates in formal environmental education settings might require attention to at least some of the principles listed above. It might also require a rethinking of some of the commonplaces of education, for example:
* the overall aim of education might require a shift in emphasis from 'information transmission' to 'creating and supporting community debate' (see Robottom & Andrew, 1996)
* the view of 'what counts as proper knowledge' might need to be broadened from one that emphasises pre-existing systematic subject matter (often drawn from scientific texts or similar source material) to one that also places importance on the development of increasingly complex and sophisticated constructions of contemporary debates (usually these constructions will emerge from actual participation in these debates - see Andrew & Robottom, 1996), and
* the role of teachers and learners might need to change from the didactic, instrumentalist deliverer/receiver school-based pattern to one of joint investigators with the community of environmental issues - a role closer to 'investigative journalism' than to 'master/ apprentice'.

We have made extensive use of Australian examples in this paper, yet, as indicated in the Introduction, we feel that similar issues of politicisation of environmentalism probably exist in South Africa. The applicability of the ideas raised in this paper for the South African context is, of course, one to be determined by readers of this journal, but we are struck with the similarity of our thinking with that of O'Donoghue & McNaught (1991) in their description and analysis of 'grass-roots' reconstructive action in South Africa. O'Donoghue & McNaught offer the following summary of the entailments of a shift towards a more responsive, participatory, critical and community-based form of curriculum organisation in South Africa (Figure 1).

Figure 1: **Curriculum reconstruction through school-based action research**


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│         EXTERNAL SUPPORT SERVICES            │
│  ┌────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐    │
│  │ Pool of        │  │ Resource         │    │
│  │ environmental  │  │ development      │    │
│  │ education      │  │ and printing     │    │
│  │ resource       │  │ support          │    │
│  │ materials and  │  │ service for      │    │
│  │ techniques     │  │ projects         │    │
│  │                │  │ and teachers     │    │
│  └────────────────┘  └──────────────────┘    │
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Teacher working groups develop, adapt and select curriculum materials through a process of school-based action research:

Reflection

CONTEXTUAL (school) CRITICAL (evaluation) DIALOGUE (discussion)

Innovation/ Current practice

Classwork and fieldwork action

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that environmentalism has become part of the discourse of Western political systems. Although it is no longer viewed as significant to only a minority of people, its mainstream acceptance has meant that environmental debates have changed.

With the domination by economic rationalism, conjecture and debate are narrowed to the extent that many of the issues that were of fundamental importance to environmentalists, as articulated by Sachs at the opening of this paper, are not part of the dominant discourse of environmentalism. The dominance of economics over environmental concerns, and the adoption of an ethic for the use of the environment, means that education is valued by government in terms of its ability to support initiatives that are perceived as economically viable and advantageous. Debates within the community which have an educative potential are thus narrowed to a dichotomous 'environment versus economics' contention.

We have argued that, in light of this subsumption of environmentalism within a discourse of government and management, there remains a place for arguments

(and the language of their original expression) whose main interest is with 'power relations, cultural authenticity and moral choice' (Sachs, 1993:xvii). In our view, the way forward is through authentic community participation and consultation. Participation and consultation must be engaged in at the beginning of the political process, recognising difference and diversity, and allowing the direction of the process to be negotiated and determined by the consulting participants themselves. Further, we have argued that environmental education has a proper role in preparing learners for involvement in this process of public participation in environmental debate. Drawing in part from a number of research projects, we have suggested some characteristics of a shift in this direction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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