



As the World Burns

John Ashton, a top adviser to Tony Blair on climate change, test-drives a new hybrid: environmental diplomacy

With his sharp suits, suave manner, and telephone directory-length list of friends in high places, John Ashton is a long way from many people's stereotype of an environmentalist. Until 2002, Ashton was head of the Environment Policy Department of the British Foreign Office, and he remains one of Tony Blair's closest behind-the-scenes advisers on climate change. After leaving government, he founded an organization called Third Generation Environmentalism (E3G). Fellow climate-change obsessive Mark Lynas, author of *High Tide:*

The Truth About Our Climate Crisis, caught up with Ashton at the Science Museum in London—just a few yards from Stephenson's Rocket, the 1829 steam locomotive that heralded the dawn of the fossil-fuel age.

You've spent more than 25 years as a diplomat and were involved in the hand-over of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule. What turned you into a green?

My time in Hong Kong was a very intense set of circumstances, involving the handover of sovereignty over six million people, and that made me think a lot more than I had about the consequences of the advice I was giving as a civil servant. It was a kind of political awakening, and I think it made me more of an activist than I was before. At the time, I was becoming more concerned, just from my casual reading and conversations, about some of the environmental problems we faced. It was a natural transition to go from there to, if you like, environmental diplomacy.



So is climate change the big one for you?

I think it is. It's by no means the whole problem, but it's a lens through which the whole problem suddenly comes into much sharper focus. It's a problem at a civilizational scale. If we can't respond effectively to the dangers of climate change, then potentially we lose civilization. Conversely, if we get climate change right, if we can rise to the challenge in the very

limited time that we have available, then we will find that we are actually doing sustainable development—because everything you need to get climate change right gives you sustainable development anyway.

I don't know if you've been following the recent debate in the United States about the "death of environmentalism." Does your work with E3G have anything to do with that?

I've done my best to follow the debate, some of which has been picked up in Europe. And yes, I think Third Generation Environmentalism is part of that landscape. The death of environmentalism critique resonates with some of the conclusions that I had come to, along with some like-minded colleagues. We'd concluded ourselves that we need to get much better at the political framing of the issues that we're trying to deal with. You have to make the politics work. The other thing we need to do is become much more grown-up in thinking about outcomes. What are the outcomes that we want to achieve? How do you offer people in strategic positions accessible choices they can make without being regarded as lunatics—choices that will then take us over the tipping point that we need in order to stabilize the climate, halt the collapse of ecosystems, and do all the other things we need for sustainable development? I'm not sure the environmental movement in its traditional form has been very good at that kind of focus on outcomes. I think what it has done with enormous success—and this is crucially important—is to raise awareness of the issues, to set an agenda.

It sounds like quite an elite strategy—as if it's really the movers and shakers you're interested in.

Well, we're not trying to achieve mass mobilization here; that's not where we have particular expertise. There are plenty of others out there who are very good at operating at the level of culture and values—in the world of politics, in the world of marketing—people who know how to influence the choices that are made through iconic communication. When you see a movie star getting into an SUV, that isn't necessarily an accident. It might be because the people who sell SUVs have persuaded the movie star to be photographed doing it. That's a very high-precision, narrow-bandwidth form of cultural communication. The environmental movement can invest imagination in how to be more effective on the other side of the argument.

What consumes your days at E3G?

We're in an experimental phase right now. One of our main areas of activity is a project on the role of Europe in the world, because it seems to me that there's a lot of potential for a stronger European contribution to the global transition to sustainable development.

So do you see the gulf between Europe and America growing wider?

Yes, but with one or two health warnings on that statement. I think it is dangerous to talk about Europe or America as if either of them were a kind of monolith operating around a central dogma. But there are very disturbing tendencies. On the whole, the European approach to world affairs is a universalist approach. I don't think there's much evidence of universalism in the approach that the Bush administration has adopted. That worries me, because I think we can solve global problems only by acting globally—and that's very difficult if the United States isn't part of the game. I also worry when I hear talk about whether we want to have a reality-based or a faith-based approach to the world. I think that the only way we can make progress on sustainable development is with a reality-based approach, essentially a rational approach applying everything we learned in the Enlightenment. I see parts of America slipping away from that. I get a feeling that I'm watching an attempt to turn the clock back to where we were in Europe before the Enlightenment. That worries me hugely because I think it's a dead end. Our problems will get worse if that tendency gets stronger.

It seems that in much of the United States, "Kyoto" is a dirty word.

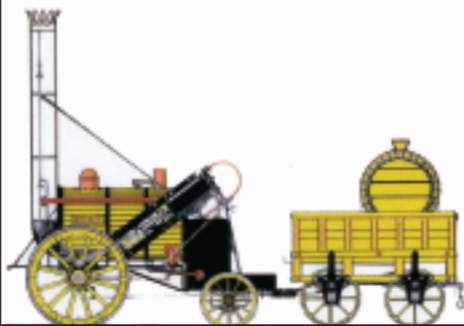
Well, there's also a lot happening in the United States outside the administration—at the level of individual states and in some of the corporations—that is positive. I think there's an opportunity for Europe to engage more with those positive tendencies: I don't think we should just say, "Let's forget about the U.S." But at the same time I'm not sure that we need to invest too much effort trying to build bridges with an administration that has not yet made clear whether it is seriously interested in addressing the problem.

What do you mean by that? What are some of the alternative approaches that you have in mind?

There's a piece of this picture that is in a way more urgent than the United States, and that is what's happening in the most rapidly de-

veloping economies outside the OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development], China above all. China is building new coal-fired power stations at the rate of about one every two weeks, and if that trend continues, the result will be an enormous lock-in of emissions. At the same time, there's huge scope for a conversation between Europe and China. This conversation will open up technology choices that will enable China to meet its urgent needs for energy security while simultaneously meeting our mutual need for climate security. In a way, I think that political energy on the European side is better invested there at the moment than it is in the U.S. administration. I also think this would get the attention of the United States pretty quickly if it started to affect anything real, because what

"If we can't respond effectively to the dangers of climate change, then potentially we lose civilization."



Europe and China would be doing is laying the foundation for the next stage of the global energy economy. I doubt that anybody in the U.S. administration would want to be left out of that for too long.

I read somewhere that if China attains U.S. consumption levels, we'd need a whole other planet to sustain that. Surely technology alone isn't going to take us off this collision course.

I agree with you at one level. China is the place that really illustrates some of the dilemmas in the most vivid way. Not just on climate change, but on other resource questions—water, for example. At the same time I'm very encouraged by the willingness in China to think about new approaches to these issues. During my visits there in the last few years, I've been

struck by how much real energy is being devoted to these questions.

Going back to the United Kingdom, how serious do you think Tony Blair is about climate change?

It's enormously welcome to have a major political figure, from a leading industrialized country, willing to invest a great deal of his personal political capital in climate change. No other leader has done that to the same extent that Blair has. The issue now is how to turn that commitment into real, tangible progress. That's the harder political challenge, and he will be judged in the end by his success in delivering that progress. We need to address this at the European level, so Britain's presidency of the European Union in the second half of this year is going to be very significant.

You were talking about how the issue is framed. Is that part of the challenge here?

Yes, it's very striking that most of the debate about climate change is a debate about constraint—about the cost of cutting emissions. In a way that's no coincidence; I think some of the interests that are opposed to change have tried very hard to frame the debate in that way, to create a negative set of political possibilities. It's not very attractive to political leaders to run a crusade against that kind of landscape. But you can equally well frame the climate problem in terms of the positive importance of a stable climate, which has a value to society in the same way that an educated population has value—so we invest in it as a public good. The questions then become: What do we need to invest to secure that value? What are the benefits of that investment, not only in terms of protection from climatic disruption, but also in terms of innovation, international security, public health, and air quality? That gives you a much more positive language for thinking about climate change.

That all sounds very optimistic.

Well, it's easy to become fatalistic in response to problems that seem monolithic. But in the end, I don't think we have a choice. If you're aware of the problems, it's very hard to just live your life as if they didn't exist. I think we have enormous assets that we can deploy for the transition to sustainable development. Whether we can mobilize the inspiration to do that in practice is an open question. I guess if Third Generation Environmentalism is about anything, it's about saying we think the attempt is worth making.