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CCBH

Witness Seminar: The Green break-through of 1989: meaning, significance and legacy

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Seminar convened by the NGOs in Britain project, University of Birmingham, and the Centre for Contemporary British History at King's College, London (CCBH@King's)

Briefing Paper

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NGO UK
Non-Governmental Organisations UK : 1945-97

This seminar seeks to consider and contextualise the break-through year of 1989 in the British environmental movement.

Although 1989 is perhaps best remembered in environmental politics for the spectacular share of the vote won by the Green party in the European parliamentary elections, the seminar will seek to address a broader range of issues, using 'Green' as an umbrella term for the environmental movement as a whole. The seminar will examine the remarkable growth of the environmental movement in the late 1980s (seen through the flourishing income, profile and supporter base of leading non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and WWF), culminating around the turn of the decade. It will explore how far NGOs were masters of their own destiny, or to what degree they were simply beneficiaries of a unique confluence of trends and circumstances. It will set the Green break-through within its international context. Finally, it will seek to understand why the break-through was not sustained into the 1990s, and assess what overall significance should be attributed to these years in the history of the British environmental movement. Throughout, the underlying aim will be to examine the role and influence of NGOs in contemporary Britain.

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The Green break-through of 1989: meaning, significance and legacy

Background

The British environmental movement, as we know it today, largely emerged from three successive waves of organisational growth.[1] The late-nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the formation of groups principally concerned with protection and preservation, such as the Commons, Footpaths and Open Spaces Society (est. 1865), the National Trust (est. 1895), and the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (now the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts) (est. 1912). Socially-elite, these groups typically sought to protect Britain's countryside and built heritage from the perceived ravages of industrialisation and urbanisation, and drew on broader cultural influences from romanticism to the arts and crafts movement. Similarly, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (est. 1889), initially formed to fight the fashion industry's demand for rare birds' plumage, can be read as an attempt to protect nature from the intrusions of modernity.

During the inter-war period, protection and preservation of the rare and beautiful was complemented by a focus on more everyday amenity. As motor-cars and the developing transport infrastructure opened up the countryside, its socially-elite guardians in the early environmental movement were joined in turn by planners and urban designers from the professional middle-classes (The Council for the Preservation of Rural England, est. 1926) and those seeking to secure the countryside's leisure and amenity function for the working population (Ramblers' Association, est. 1935).

Until the mid twentieth century, then, Britain's environmental movement was predominantly focused upon preservation and amenity issues in the local and the national spheres. The third great wave of environmental organisations, most of which were formed in the dozen years between the Torrey Canyon oil spill (1967) and the Three Mile Island accident (1979), broadened the scope of the environmental movement to encompass global questions of population, resource use and degradation. While many of these groups were formed in Britain (Conservation Society, est. 1966; People (later the Green party), est. 1973; the Green Alliance, est. 1978), others were North American imports, with Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace establishing their UK arms in 1971 and 1977 respectively.

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[1] The typology used here draws upon the work of Christopher Rootes. See C. Rootes, 'Environmental NGOs and the Environmental Movement in England', in N. Crowson, M. Hilton & J. McKay (eds.), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state actors in society and politics since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp.201-221.

The new perspectives promoted by third-wave groups were explored through a range of high-profile publications. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) explored pesticide contamination of the food chain; Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1971) highlighted the neo-Malthusian strain within the third-wave, while its scepticism towards orthodox economics and the use of finite resources was set out in both the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972) and the Ecologist magazine's *Blueprint for Survival* (1972); Fritz Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered* (1973) became a seminal text for the fields of environmentalism and development, and a bridge between the two, while James Lovelock's *Gaia* (1979) presented a quasi-religious perspective of the biosphere as a single, self-regulating entity. Whilst it would be crude to characterise older environmental groups as socially conservative, at the time of their formation the third-wave groups were more distinctively radical than their more-established peers, drawing from the counter-culture and middle-class radicalism of the post-war decades, and emerging, in at least one case, directly from the Labour movement (Transport 2000 (now Campaign for Better Transport), est. 1973).

The global perspective of the third-wave, if not its more radical philosophy, was foreshadowed by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) (est. 1961), initially conceived as a fund-raising device for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

By the 1980s, therefore, the British environmental movement was diverse, broad-based, and long-established, with a membership that stretched back more than a century. It was well-placed to take advantage of the opportunities the 1980s would offer.

The Green break-through

During the 1980s, a series of factors acted upon each other to drive the environmental up the political agenda: environmental problems and disasters were given prominent coverage by an increasingly interested media, leading politicians to respond with initiatives and rhetoric, which in turn further encouraged the media to treat 'the environment' as an issue of the day.

Environmental problems seemed to grow and accumulate quickly during the 1980s. Issues such as the chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) threat to the ozone layer, sulphur-emissions leading to acid rain, and, increasingly, what was then referred to as the greenhouse effect - all were widely reported, and gave credence to the globalised perspective of the third-wave groups. At the same time, disasters such as Bhopal (1984) and Chernobyl (1986) warned of the dangers inherent in industrial 'progress',

while Britain's Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) epidemic renewed concerns surrounding intensive farming techniques. As the greenhouse effect was gradually developing into its current hegemonic position in environmental debate, a series of more specific problems also supplied the media with constantly varied copy: 1988 saw both the *Karin B* incident, and Phocine distemper virus (PDV) kill half of Britain's seal population, while the selection of planet Earth as *Time* magazine's 'person of the year' highlighted the threat to biodiversity. James Hansen's testimony to US Congress, meanwhile, was a landmark in the developing concern around the greenhouse effect. The following year came the catastrophic *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

Impressive though the above list is (even more so for being partial), the existence of environmental problems could arguably be demonstrated for any period in history. What distinguished the 1980s in terms of the wider public consciousness was not so much what happened, but that what happened was so widely reported and echoed by 'mainstream' media and politics. Specialist environmental correspondents began to be taken on by national titles, such as Geoffrey Lean at the *Observer*, Charles Clover at the *Daily Telegraph*, as the issue established itself on the news agenda. (They would later be joined by journalists such as Nicholas Schoon at the *Independent*, and John Vidal at the *Guardian*.) Their work contributed to growing public concern, as evidenced through polling data (see appendix, graph 1), and the popularity of John Elkington & Julia Hailes' *Green Consumer Guide* (1988).

Politicians and policy-makers, in turn, responded to this concern (see appendix, graph 2). The main parties began issuing environmental policy statements, while the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (1987), championed the theoretical compatibility between economic growth and long-term environmental protection, with the notion of sustainable development. A high-point in Britain was the publication of 1990's *This Common Inheritance*, the first white paper on the environment, and the culmination of a long campaign, led by the Green Alliance. The most high-profile intervention, however, came from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in a series of speeches she made on the environment during 1988-89. Most famously, she used a lecture at the Royal Society to argue that action on environmental problems was 'one of the great challenges of the late Twentieth Century', upon which continued economic growth would depend.[2] Once again, the significance of the speech came not through its actual content, but its effect in the media-political echo-chamber. As Tom Burke of the Green Alliance argued at

[2] Margaret Thatcher, Speech to the Royal Society, 27 Sept 1988, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107346, accessed 4 Feb 2009.

the time, 'the loop of that magic circle whereby the media only cover what politicians are interested in and politicians are only interested in that which the media will cover has now closed firmly around the environment.'[3]

Within this context, the groups that made up the environmental movement both proliferated and grew at a startling rate, countering the declining membership trends seen in other associational groups (see appendix, graphs 3 and 4).[4] As the NGOs attracted more and more members, so their financial strength grew through the 1980s, peaking around the turn of the decade (see appendix, graph 5). Fuelled by this financial expansion, staffing levels rose dramatically in the NGOs. Friends of the Earth, for example, had 17 staff members in 1982, but 128 a decade later.[5] Finally, and perhaps most spectacularly, came the performance of the Green party in the 1989 elections to the European parliament. Although it is dangerous to draw firm conclusions from the results of an electoral contest to which the British voting public attach relatively little significance, their 15% share of the vote was at the time perceived as a breakthrough for the party, as they displaced the Liberal Democrats to come third in national vote share.

It is tempting to attribute this growth to levels of demand: citizens, alarmed by the rising number of media reports of environmental problems, turn to membership of environmental NGOs as a way of expressing their concern, and making a practical if small, contribution to the solution. While this explanation no doubt contains some truth, it neglects the supply-side of NGO growth – that, during the 1980s, environmental groups adopted increasingly sophisticated marketing and public relations strategies, recruiting (and being funded by) a largely passive supporter-base, and thereby developing themselves as 'protest businesses'.[6] Key here was the direct-mail marketing strategy, advertising membership to those with a probable latent sympathy towards environmental causes, perhaps by virtue of their membership of targeted demographic groups, or their history as purchasers of increasingly extensive NGO merchandising operations. NGOs including Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and CPRE all adopted this technique in the late 1980s, which came alongside a trend

[3] Green Alliance Mss: Tom Burke, 'Anno Viridis – The Green Revolution in Britain', 1989, Box: 1989. Green Alliance, London.

[4] P. Hall, 'Social Capital in Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29, 3, 1999.

[5] Annual Reports, Friends of the Earth Ltd (Company No. 01012357) and Friends of the Earth Trust Ltd (Company No. 01533942), Companies House.

[6] G. Jordan, and W. Maloney, *The Protest Business: Mobilizing Campaign Groups*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997

towards the centralisation of membership records, and a more general awareness of the need to project a positive image to potential recruits.

Break-through to bust, 1990s

Perhaps even more remarkable than this growth of the environmental movement, however, is how boom turned to bust almost immediately afterwards. According to World Values Survey data, 5.9% of the UK population declared they belonged to conservation/environment groups in 1990, declining to just 1.5% at the end of the decade.[7] The early 1990s was undoubtedly a period of real decline (or at least stagnation) for a number of environmental groups, particularly amongst those born in the 1960s and 1970s. This can be seen in both membership figures (problematic sources at the best of times), and more transparently in levels of income. This fall in income was also reflected in a large number of redundancies in the early 1990s in the affected organisations. Clearly, the broader economic situation played an important role here. NGOs found that people had far less discretionary income with which to express their environmental solidarity, making it in turn harder for groups to pursue the expensive marketing strategies that had hitherto fuelled NGO expansion. As the *Economist* magazine remarked at the time, 'Thank you, green movement, for showing everybody the problem in the mirror. See you in the next boom.'[8]

Such an explanation for decline would complement persuasive theories explaining the popularity of green movement in terms of post-war affluence.[9] However, economic determinism can only take us so far. Also, in the early 1990s, Tom Burke's magic-circle of media coverage, discussed above, began to disintegrate. Just as environmental NGOs were laying off staff, so newspapers began to lay off their specialist environmental correspondents, and the issue's political saliency began to fade, even allowing for the coverage afforded UNCED in 1992.[10] Stagnation and decline could also be explained in terms of simple organisational inertia – success in the different world of the 1980s was necessarily followed by a period of retrenchment and renewal. But there was also a sense of the agenda moving on. In the early 1990s media coverage, always motivated by novelty, was more likely to concentrate upon the new

[7] The decline is probably even greater than these figures suggest, and the 2000 question included animal rights groups as well (source: World Values Survey: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

[8] 'Green Storm Falling', *The Economist*, Dec 1990.

[9] F. Parkin, *Middle Class Radicalism: The Social Bases of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (Manchester, 1968); R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, (Princeton, NJ, 1977).

[10] P. Rawcliffe, *Environmental Pressure Groups in Transition* (Manchester, 1998), pp.66-7.

breed of direct action protestors than the established NGOs, a problem exacerbated by the fact that groups such as Friends of the Earth were initially hostile to their more radical allies.[11] Although rapprochement and effective co-operation did follow (notably during the successful campaign to save south-east London's Oxleas Wood from the threat of the planned Thames river crossing in the mid-1990s), the direct action protesters formed a clear and dramatic break from the third wave groups, significantly more radical in terms of philosophy and approach than they had been, even at their inception. While the direct action groups were tiny compared to the established NGOs, their prominence in these years should nevertheless be seen as a highly significant development for the environmental movement as a whole.

International considerations

Finally, when considering this topic, it is important not to focus too greatly on specific national explanations. The green breakthrough, and the subsequent bust, took place internationally. In France, the Green vote shot up at the 1989 elections, went slightly down at the 1993 elections, before collapsing at the 1994 and 1995 elections. The phenomenon is even more visible in Italy, where the two green lists at the European elections gave the green vote its highest score ever at any elections in the peninsula. It is less visible in German voting patterns, but Germany did experience a fall in the number of supporters of Greenpeace from 750,000 in 1990/1991 to 517,000 in 1995.[12] The decline of the press coverage of environmental issues has also been noted by many scholars in Germany.[13] The trough was also noticeable elsewhere in Europe, especially in Central and Eastern European countries where 'the 1990–99 time trends show a marked drop in environmental group membership in many of these former communist nations'.[14] At the European Union level, this retreat of the green vote after 1989 (and before 1999) can be seen in the declining proportion of Green MEPs in European Parliament. In the US, membership figures of environmental organisations also show a familiar decline in the early 1990s, while finances hit a plateau (see appendix, graph 6). Environmental ideas generally seem also to have retreated: 'In 1998, a Lou Harris poll found that 97 percent of Americans believed that more should be done to protect

[11] R. Lamb, *Promising the Earth* (London, 1996), pp.6-7.

[12] W.T. Markham, *Environmental Organizations in Modern Germany: Hardy Survivors in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (2008), p. 240.

[13] For further detail, see Markham, *Environmental Organizations in Modern Germany*, pp.166-7.

[14] R. Dalton, 'The greening of the globe? Cross-national levels of environmental group membership', *Environmental Politics* 14, 4, 2005, pp.441-459.

the environment; five years later, as small-donor contributions decreased sharply, the same question received an 82 percent response.'[15]

[15] M. Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), p.4.

Questions to consider

Influence and legacy

- In what ways can NGOs be said to be influential, and how is this influence exercised?
- Did the Green break-through lead to a meaningful policy legacy?
- How far (and in what ways) were environmental NGOs embedded within the policy system by the end of the 1980s, and is the Green break-through an important explanation for this?

Context

- In general terms, what accounts for increased public awareness and concern for environmental issues in the 1980s?
- What role did macro-economics play, e.g. the recession of the early 1990s?
- What role did the issue of climate change play in these years?
- How far should 1989 be seen as a pivotal year in the environmental movement?

Agency

- How far were environmental NGOs simply riding a wave of public enthusiasm in the 1980s, one which inevitably passed on with changing fashion?
- What significance should be placed upon technological and organisational changes within NGOs themselves, for explaining the Green break-through?
- How far should the 1980s be seen as pivotal in the development of media strategies by NGOs?

Select Chronology

1824 Formation of Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (later RSPCA)
1853 Smoke Nuisance Abatement Act
1859 Publication of Darwin's *On the Origins of the Species*
1863 Alkali Act
1865 Formation of Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society
1891 Formation of Society for the Protection of Birds (later RSPB)
1895 Formation of National Trust
1900 Convention for the Preservation of Wild Animals, Birds and Fish in Africa
1903 Formation of Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire (Later Flora and Fauna International)
1912 Formation of Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (later Wildlife Trusts)
1926 Formation of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), followed by similar bodies in Scotland and Wales
1932 Kinder Scout trespass
1935 Formation of Ramblers' Association
1936 Formation of Standing Committee on National Parks (later Council for National Parks) by voluntary associations
1957 Windscale fire
1958 Formation of Council of Nature as umbrella body for conservation sector (closed 1980)
Opening of Britain's first stretch of motorway, Preston Bypass (now part of M6)
1961 Formation of WWF
1962 Publication of Carson's *Silent Spring*
Height of Thalidomide scandal
1963 Publication of Department of Transport's Buchanan Report, *Traffic in Towns*
1966 Formation of Conservation Society
1967 *Torrey Canyon* oil spillage (leading to the establishment of Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP), 1969)
1968 Publication of Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Commons' in *Science*
1969 Formation of CoEnCo as umbrella body, an outcome of *The Countryside in 1970* conferences
1970 Earth Day, USA
European Conservation Year (EYC)
Publication of *The Protection of the Environment: The Fight Against Pollution*, Cmnd 4373
Launch of *Ecologist* magazine
Establishment of the UK's Department of the Environment
1971 Establishment of Friends of the Earth in the UK
Launch of UNESCO's *Man and the Biosphere* programme
UK publication of Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*
Publication of RCEP's first report
1972 Publication of Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, Ecologist magazine's *Blueprint for Survival*, and Ward & Dubos' *Only One Earth*

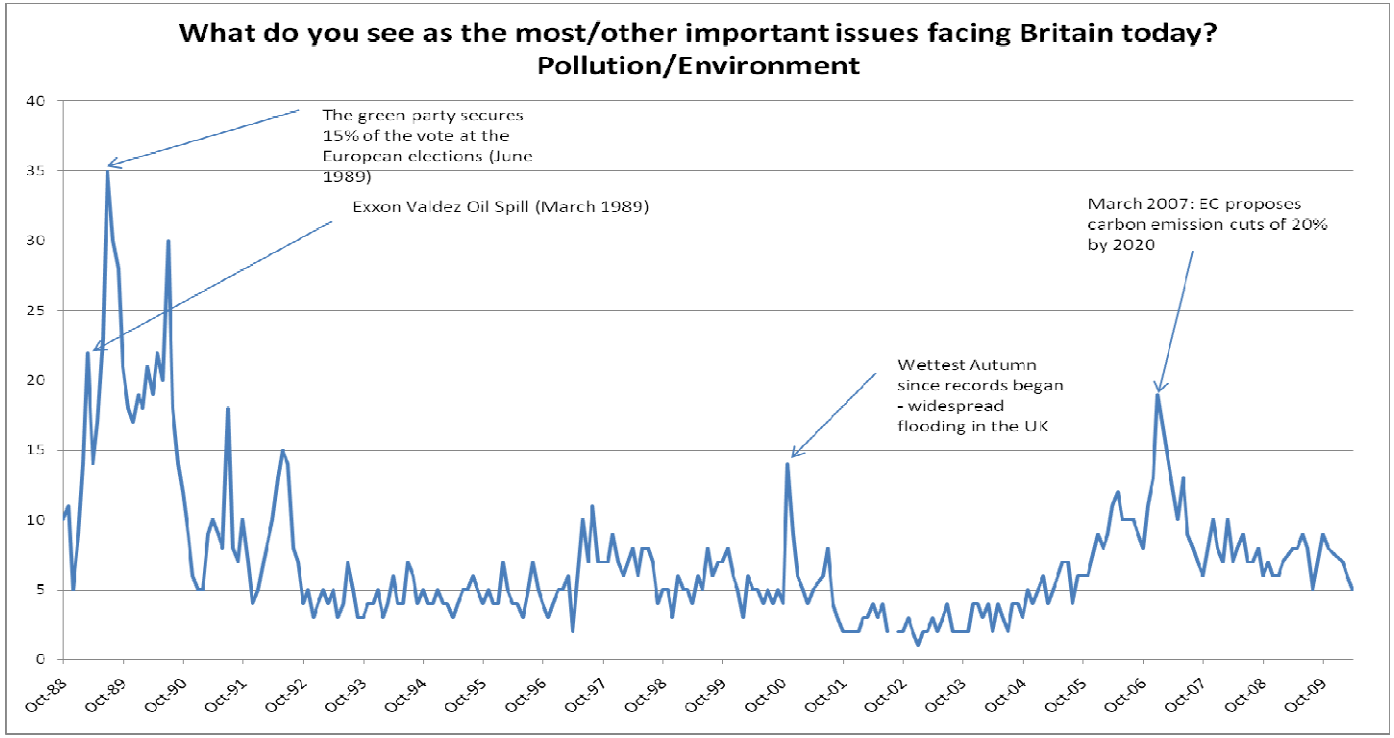
1973 Formation of People (later Ecology party, later Green party), and Socialist Environmental Resource Association (SERA)
Publication of Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*
Launch of EEC's first Environmental Action Programme
1977 Formation of Conservative Ecology Group, and Liberal Ecology Group
1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident
Publication of Lovelock's *Gaia*
1980 Formation of Die Grünen (West Germany), and Wildlife Link
Launch of IUCN's World Conservation Strategy
Publication of *Global 2000 Report to the President*
1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act
1984 Bhopal disaster
1985 Transport Act paves way for the deregulation of bus services
1986 Chernobyl disaster
1987 Publication of World Commission on Environment and Development's *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland report)
1988 *Karin B* incident
Phocine distemper virus (PDV) kills half of Britain's seal population
Testimony of James Hansen to US Congress on climate change
Speeches of Margaret Thatcher to the Royal Society and the Conservative Party Conference
Friends of the Earth launches its first direct mail campaign
Publication of Elkington & Hailes' *Green Consumer Guide*
1989 Department of Transport's *National Road Traffic Forecasts* predict rises of 82-142% by 2025.
Publication of Department of Transport's *Roads to Prosperity* White Paper
Exxon Valdez oil spill, Alaska
Speech of Margaret Thatcher to the UN General Assembly
1990 Publication of first Environment White Paper, *This Common Inheritance*, Cmnd 1200; Labour and the Liberals follow with similar statements
1991 Establishment of Earth First! in the UK
1992 Peak of Twyford Down protest
UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio Earth Summit)
1993 Peak of M11 link road protest
1995 Greenpeace's Brent Spar protest
Revival of Reclaim the Streets
Occupation of Newbury Bypass site begins

Appendix

(Note: additional figures and graphs available at: http://www.ngo.bham.ac.uk/appendix/NGOs_handbook.htm)

Graph 1

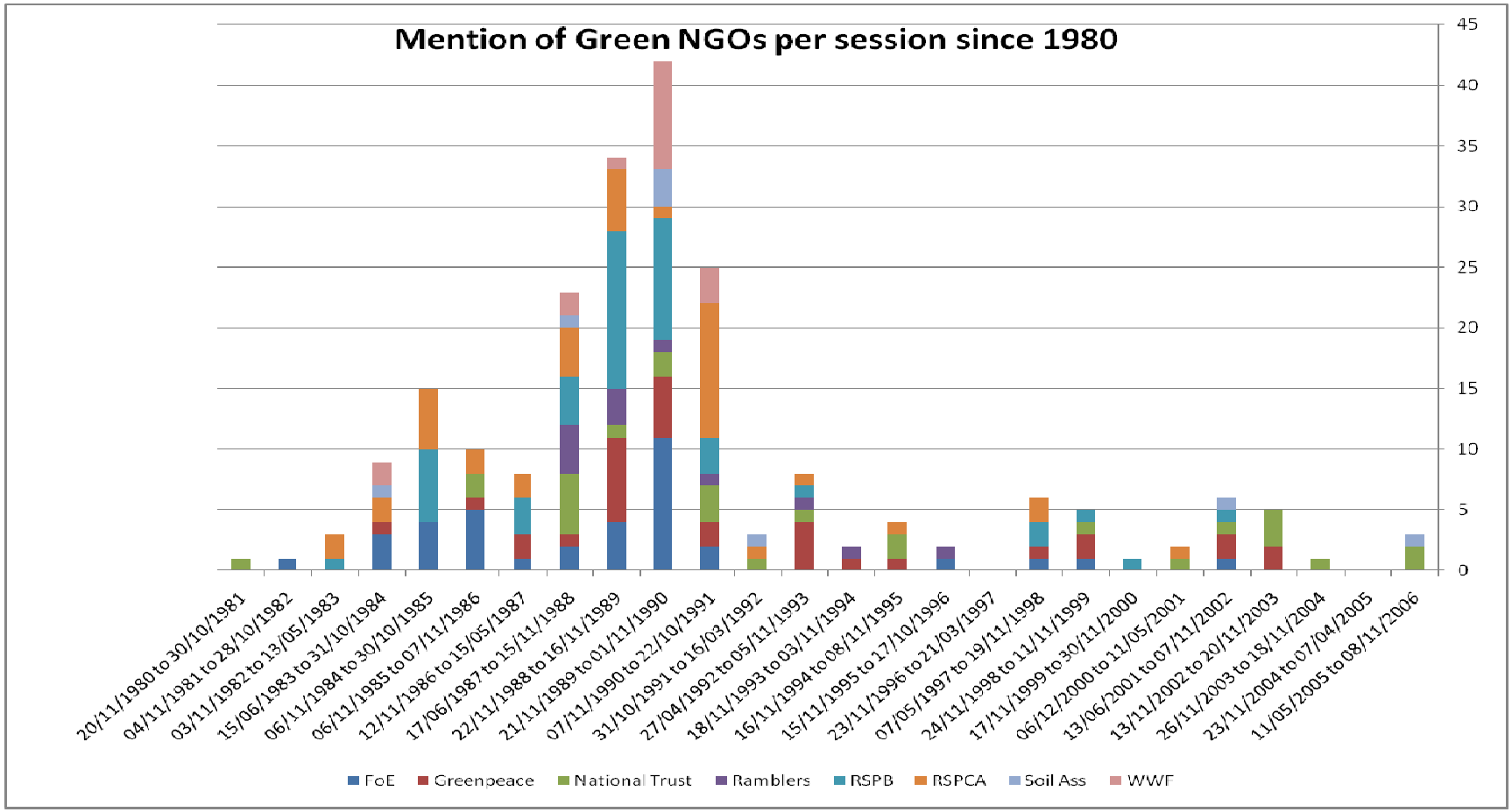
MORI polling: Most important issues facing Britain, 1988-2009



Source: IPSOS-Mori Issues Index

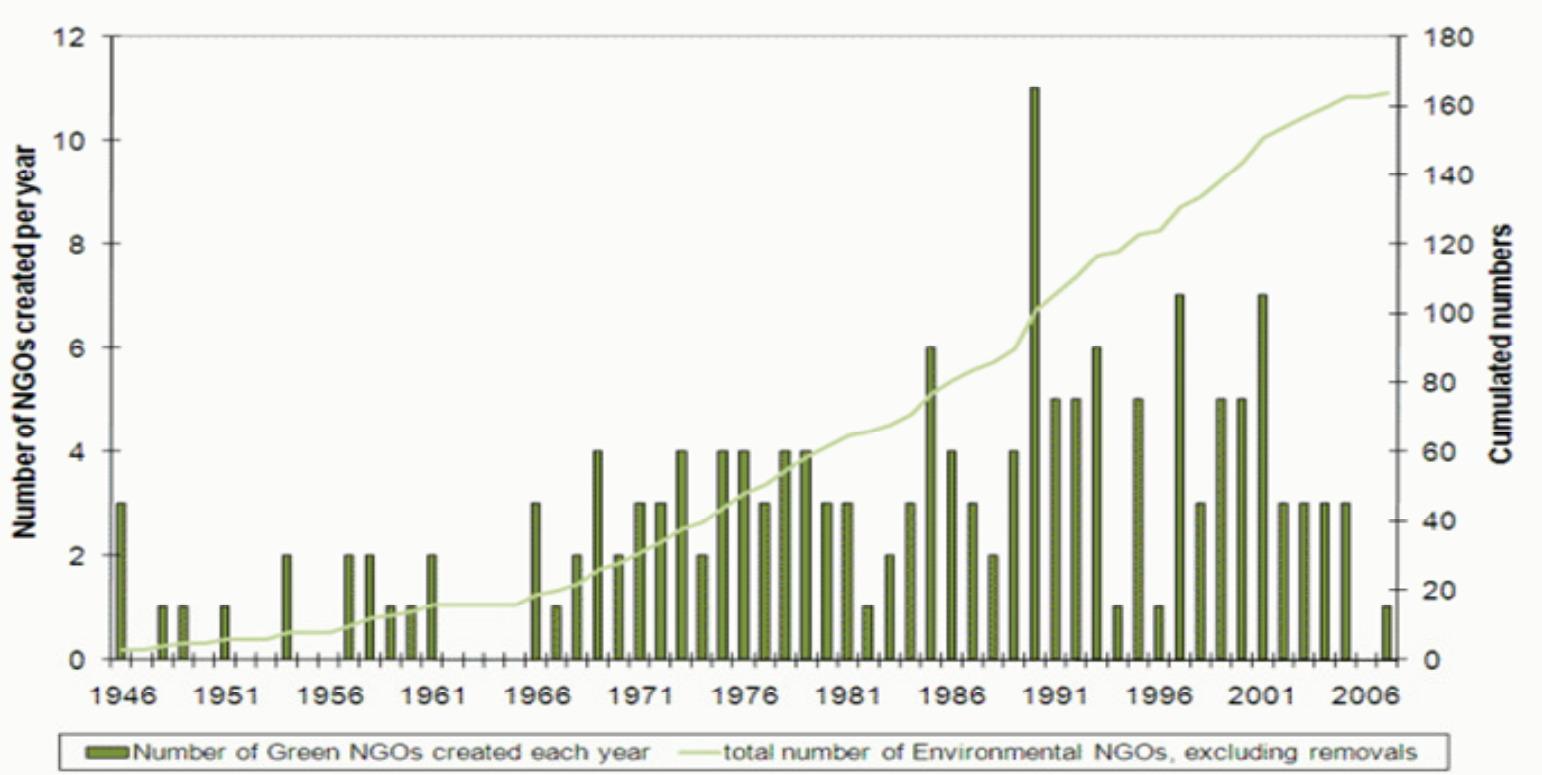
Graph 2

Mentions of environmental NGOs in House of Commons, 1980-2006



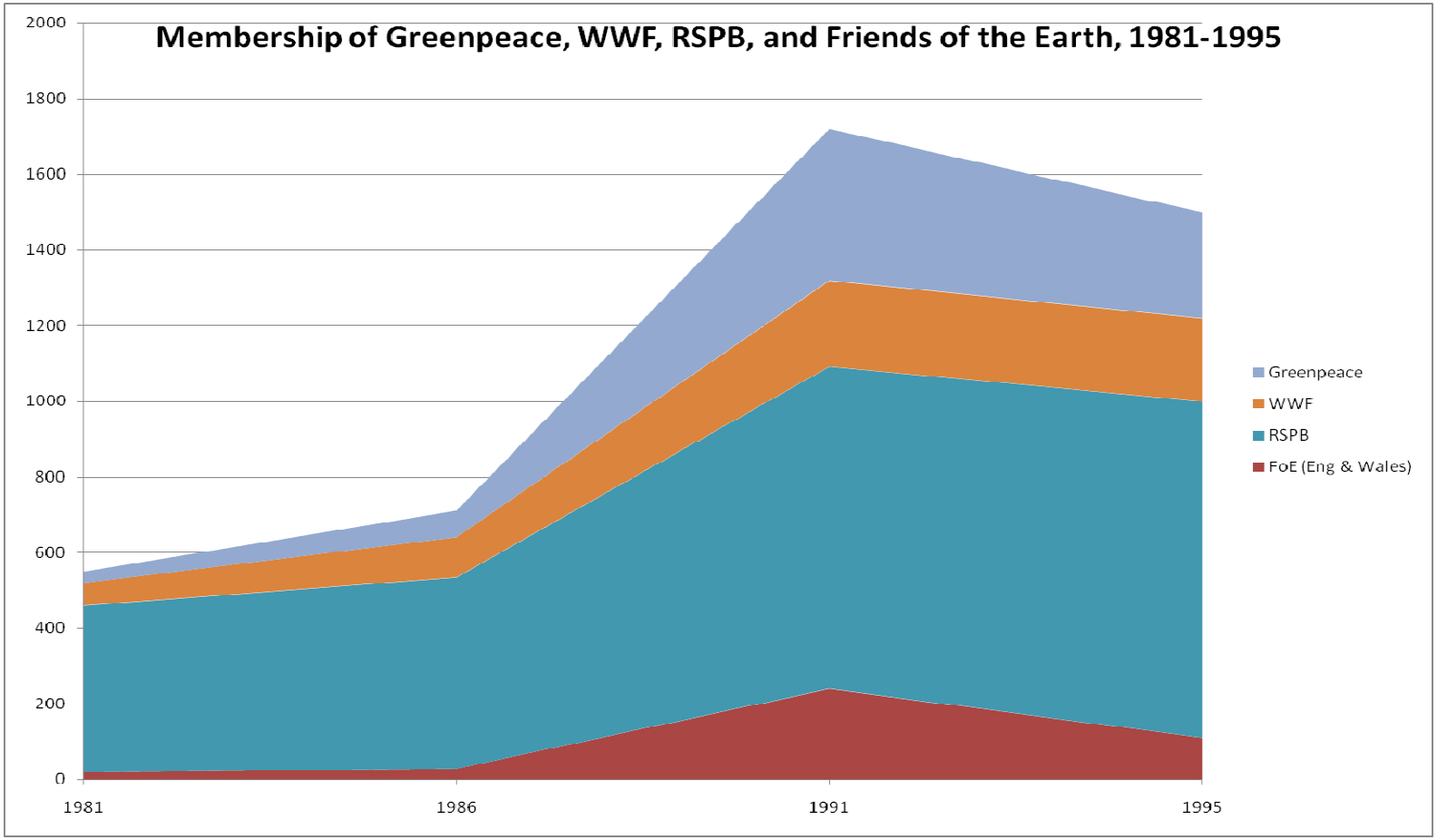
Graph 3

Number and formation of UK Environmental NGOs



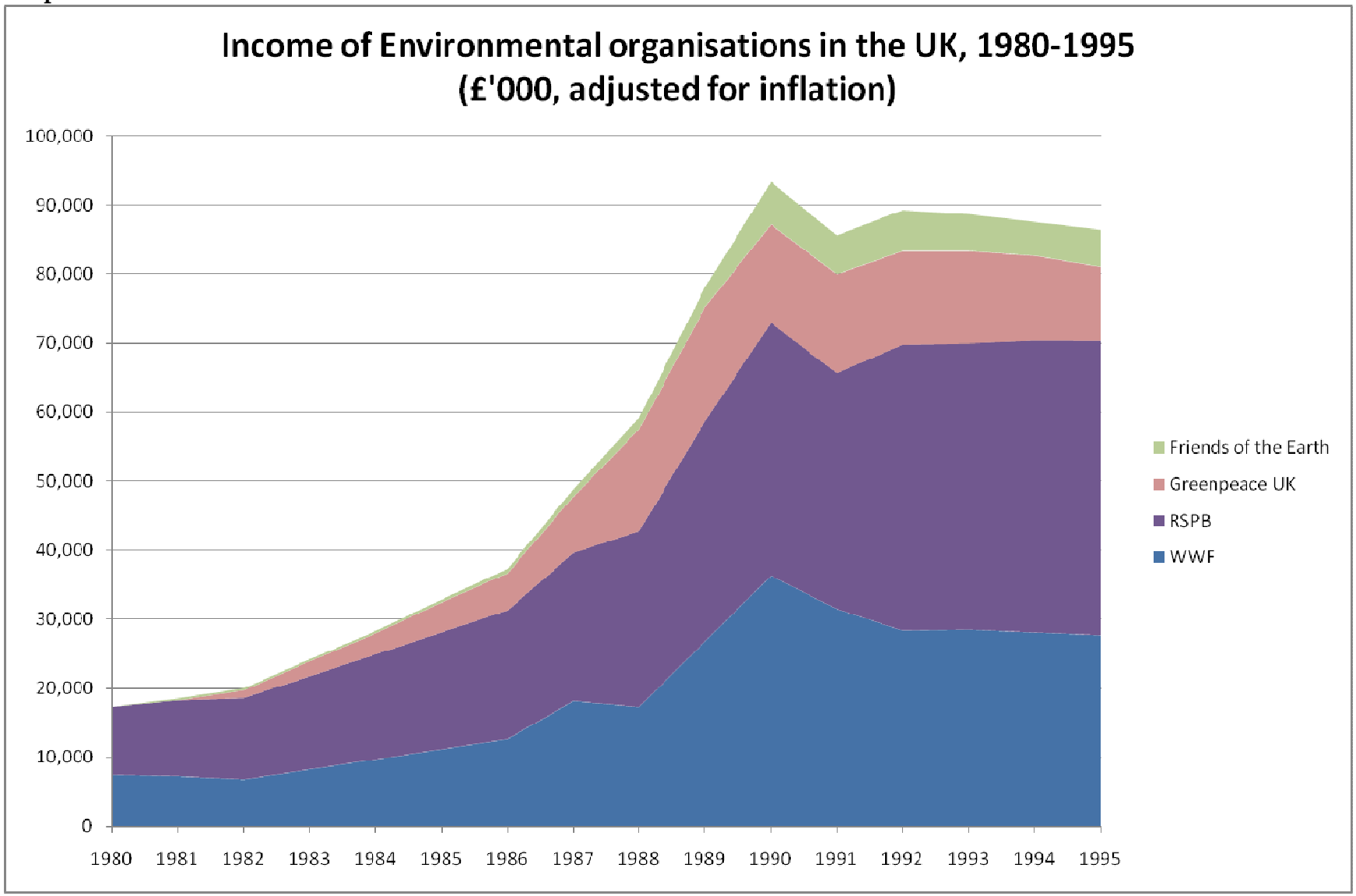
Source: Database of Non-Governemental Organisations, www.dango.bham.ac.uk

Graph 4



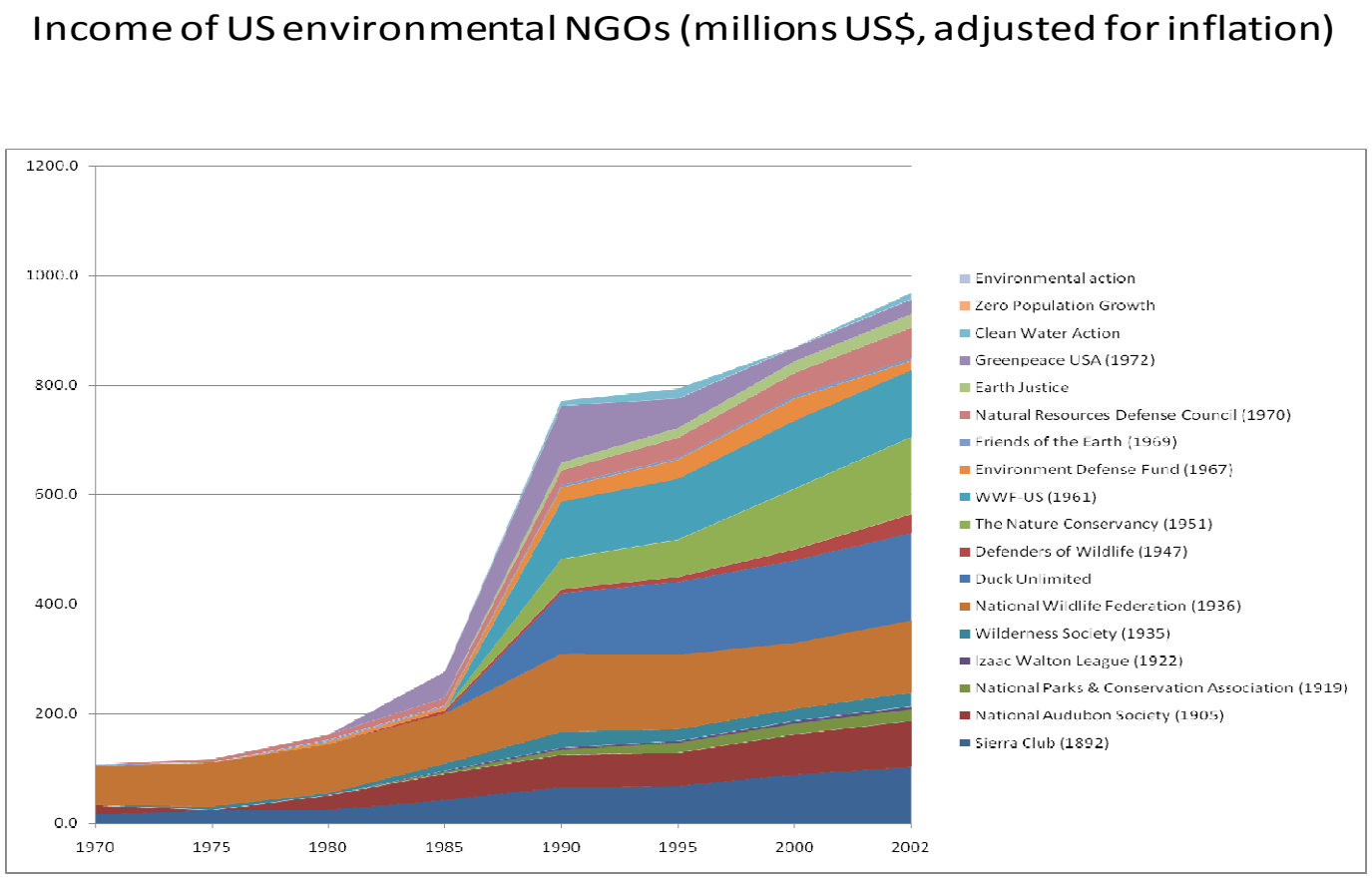
Source: Annual reports, various years, organisations concerned.

Graph 5



Source: Annual reports, various years, organisations concerned; also *Charity Trends*, various years.

Graph 6



Source: Figures drawn from Bosso, *Environment, Inc* (Univ. Press of Kansas, 2005), p. 56.