Sustaining Liberal Democracy

Also by John Barry

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GREEN LIBERALISM: The Free and the Green Society

IMPERFECTION AND IMPARTIALITY: A Liberal Theory of Social Justice

Sustaining Liberal Democracy

Ecological Challenges and Opportunities

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Foreword by Andrew Dobson

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Foreword

Andrew Dobson

Ten years ago, Mark Sagoff asked whether environmentalists could be liberals (Sagoff, 1988, pp. 146–70). At the time, this seemed an odd question to ask – not because it lacked intrinsic interest, but because the politically important relationships seemed to be between environmentalism and socialism, or environmentalism and feminism, rather than between environmentalism and liberalism. Sagoff should now be congratulated for his foresight, however, because the increasing dominance of the liberal worldview in academic and political life makes it imperative that environmentalists (or the environmental agenda more broadly) are brought into contact with it. In recent years a number of people have explored the relationship between liberalism and environmentalism (Hayward, 1995; Eckersley, 1996; Wissenburg, 1998; Barry, 1999; Miller, 1999, for example), and in one way or another each of the chapters in this book deals with it too – in a manner that reveals both the tensions created and the opportunities presented by the possibility of a liberal environmentalism, or an environmentally sensitive liberalism.

On the face of it, liberal and environmental impulses are as opposed as it is politically possible to be, with liberalism's individualism, its endorsement of private acquisition, its support for limited government, its lauding of the market as an efficient and equitable distributor of resources, and its opposition to state support for definitive versions of 'the good life', all called into question by the environmentalist agenda. In the name of the overweening value of autonomy, liberals will resist environmentalist attempts to alter individual tastes or preferences, and in the tradition of Kant and Locke they will insist on the kind of strict value demarcation between human beings and other animals that environmentalists have tried to undermine.

But liberalism is tremendously elastic, and it has plenty of intellectual resources that can be deployed in an environment-friendly fashion. Liberal environmentalists will argue, for example, that while political institutions should indeed be neutral in respect of the good, citizens themselves are perfectly entitled to argue ethical preferences in the way environmentalists would like. Indeed, liberals may suggest that *only* in the tolerant liberal polity will environmentalists get the air-time they so crave. Similarly, while Kant and Locke are indeed part

of the liberal heritage, so are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and these latter two will answer the question 'What faculty, X, must beings possess to be entitled to moral considerability?' in a very different way to the former two – in a way, indeed, that will bring a smile to the faces of environmentalists. Perhaps most importantly, the liberal language of rights can be deployed for ends that will further gladden environmentalist hearts. The possibility of rights for animals is much discussed, for example, and there have been attempts to push rights-talk into ever more exotic areas of the non-human natural world. Even more significant, maybe, is the idea of rights for future generations, since this ties the environmental and liberal agendas tight together. This might not be immediately apparent, but once we realize that 'the environment' is one of the things we hand on to future generations, and if we accept that future generations have a right to a sustainable and satisfying environment, then future generation rights and environmental sustainability can be seen to be intimately linked. As Hayward astutely points out: 'In talking about rights of future generations, one is already addressing matters of environmental concern' (Hayward, 1994, p. 142).

Perhaps, though, this is just the point at which liberalism and environmentalism come unstuck. In his path-breaking analysis of the relationship between the two, Marcel Wissenburg, one of the editors of the present book, writes that:

We may also expect the introduction of the notion of limits to growth and resources, and with it that of sustainability, to lead to questions of a substantive normative nature. A sustainable society need not be one big Yellowstone Park – we can imagine a worldwide version of Holland stuffed with cows, grain and greenhouses, or even a global Manhattan without the Park to be as sustainable and for many among us as pleasant as the first. Hence a greener liberalism will have to define more clearly what kind of sustainability, what kind of world, it aims for. (Wissenburg, 1998, p. 81)

I think Wissenburg is right about this, and if he is, then his 'greener liberalism' will be obliged to develop a moral conception of our relationship with the non-human natural world in the context of deciding what kind of world we want to hand on to future generations. On this account, environmental sustainability *necessarily* raises questions regarding the good life, and so liberalism's endorsing of the objective of environmental sustainability commits it to a definitive moral conception

of 'people's appropriate relation to nature' (in Sagoff's words, 1988, p. 150). If this is a pill that liberalism cannot swallow – as I suspect it cannot – then this may be where liberalism and ecologism finally part company.

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