‘Green Politics, Democracy and Political Judgement’


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One could say that the use of the language of democracy in political debate is often for the same reasons a drunk uses a lamppost: for support rather than illumination. In much the same way as Achterberg (Chapter 9), following Kymlicka (1990), argues that any plausible political theory embodies a commitment to the view of individuals as deserving of equal respect and concern, in a similar fashion one can posit democracy as a value to be considered as an essential part of all acceptable political theories. In this respect, green politics is no different in its claim to be part of the ‘democratic project’. However, beyond a shared commitment to democracy, political theories differ as to what they understand by democracy, the reasons why they advocate it, and how they envisage its institutionalisation. Thus, although all theories worthy of respect and serious consideration endorse the general concept of democracy, they disagree over the different possible conceptualisations of democracy. On both these points, the concept and conceptualisation of democracy, questions have been raised as to their necessary connection to green politics.

It is because of its status as an unqualified positive value or a self-evident ‘good thing’ that criticising a political theory as undemocratic, or claiming that it is only contingently committed to democracy, is a serious charge. Such charges have been brought against green politics by a number of authors, most notably Saward (1993), who argues that there is no necessary or logical reason why green politics should be democratic, and a fortiori why green politics ought to be understood as being radically democratic. Other interpretations of green politics indicate that by its very nature green politics to achieve its aims must be undemocratic and authoritarian (Passmore 1993:478). This critique concerning the relationship between green politics and democracy is all the more damaging to green political theory precisely because it claims to be more democratic than contemporary liberal democracy. Greens often claim to be committed, for example, to participatory and direct forms of democratic decision making (Dobson 1990:25–6; Eckersley 1992: 173–8; Goodin 1992:124–7). How are we to understand and seek to resolve this apparent contradiction? Part of the problem highlighted by this critique relates to the under-theorised nature and status of ‘sustainability’ within green political discourse. The aim of this chapter is to argue that explicating the political-
normative character of sustainability offers a way in which a non-contingent green adherence to democratic decision making can be grounded.

The essential indeterminateness and normative character of the concept of sustainability implies, I argue, that it needs to be understood as a discursively ‘created’ rather than an authoritatively ‘given’ product. The normative and factual dimensions of sustainability are what grounds the appeal to ‘democratic will formation’ with regard to its instantiation as a regulative social principle. Sustainability is thus both a matter of practical judgement, arising from its normative character, and a matter of knowledge. Sustainability is thus more than finding ecologically rational methods of production and consumption; it also involves collective judgement on those patterns. It is not just a matter of examining the ecological means to determined ends; ultimately sustainability requires a political-normative judgement on the ends themselves. Sustainability is therefore a matter for communicative as well as instrumental rationality, but the former takes precedence over the latter. This normative character of sustainability as a public principle or social goal makes it conducive to democratic as opposed to non-democratic forms of ‘will formation’. That is, we can link green politics and democracy by recognising first that as a normative concept sustainability is a political/ethical issue first and only derivatively a technical/ economic one and, second, by demonstrating that this political articulation ought, for traditional democratic reasons and for reasons specific to the realisation of sustainability, to be democratic rather than non-democratic, such that democracy and ecological rationality are mutually reinforcing. Finally, we can show that the green understanding of democracy envisages the ‘preservative transcendence’ of aspects of liberal democracy, but that there are problems with the self-characterisation of green political theory as radically democratic in terms of seeking to replace representative institutions with direct forms.

This chapter starts from the observation that empirically there seems to be a positive relationship between democratic institutions and ecological protection. On the one hand, the more democratic a society is, the more likely it is that ecological sustainability will be enhanced, or could be enhanced. In some respects this is related to the way in which democracy as ‘responsive rule’ (Saward 1993:65–6), or a communicative process (Dryzek 1990), is more effective in ensuring the relatively quick adjustment of economic-ecological processes in the face of ecological disruptions than authoritarian, non-democratic systems. On the other hand in their practical political activity environmental groups have been at the forefront of efforts to ‘democratisate’ state institutions, particularly in relation to access to information, scientific data, public inquiries and more open forms of public policy making (Paehlke 1988). In a sense then although there may be a question as to the strict theoretical relationship between green political theory and democracy, in practice this tension seems more apparent than real. There is thus a sound basis upon which to establish the theoretical counterpart to this empirical connection.
It is the ‘primacy of the political’ that serves to underwrite the non-contingent place of democracy within ecologism. It is only if ecological sustainability is reduced to a technical injunction that other theories can claim to be ‘green’ or ‘ecological’, or that green politics and democracy become disconnected: such technical/economic interpretations ground environmental rather than ecological positions (Dobson 1990:3). Following from this we can claim that a minimal position is to assert the compatibility of environmentalism with democracy, either in the sense of environmentalists being seen as another interest group whose aims can be included within the framework of traditional pluralist accommodation, or the ‘environmental crisis’ as an external factor to which existing democracies can easily adjust. However, what I want to establish in this chapter is a non-contingent relationship between green politics and democracy by arguing that from the green perspective enhanced democratic structures and practices are not merely desirable but in fact fundamentally necessary. That is, it is not just the case that democracy is weakly compatible with green politics, in little danger of being undermined (since greens are so democratic in practice), but, rather, that the achievement of sustainability makes democracy a core, non-negotiable, value of green political theory.

SOME DEFINITIONS

Sustainability and sustainable development

‘Sustainability’ here refers to the ensemble of social-nature relations in general, material and moral, which is to be distinguished from ‘sustainable development’, which refers more specifically to continuously productive economic-ecological exchanges, in terms of a non-deteriorating capital stock (both natural and human) (Pearce et al. 1993). Sustainability can be considered the set of which sustainable development is a sub-set, concerned with a much wider set of human relations than the aim to ‘green’ existing patterns of production, consumption and lifestyles. Sustainability, unlike sustainable development, is concerned as much with the ends of our use of the environment as with the ecological means to economic development. In economic terms, sustainability is concerned with both human demand on the environment and ecological supply-side conditions. The reason for this distinction is that economistic notions of sustainable development may crowd out the more explicitly political-normative notion of sustainability and lead to more technical, less democratic forms of decision making. Briefly put, what is needed is to place the economics of sustainable development within the overall context of the ‘ethics and politics of sustainability’.
This chapter is not concerned with developing a particular green conception of democracy so much as with establishing some necessary connections between democracy and the realisation of sustainability as a social goal. As used here, democracy is understood to be first and foremost a communicative process, a political procedure between individuals and institutions, where the former decide collectively binding decisions which are then enforced by the latter. However, the model of democracy that is assumed to comport with green theory is a discursive/deliberative one of the type associated with a tradition in democratic theory which includes civic republicanism, Rousseau, contemporary theorists, such as Habermas (1987), who are concerned with the vital significance of the ‘public sphere’ to democratic politics, radical democrats such as Barber (1984), and ecologically minded democratic theorists such as Dryzek (1987, 1990). Other chapters in this volume (see Dobson and Achterberg) explore the details of this conception of democracy in more detail.

**POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND SUSTAINABILITY**

As a principle sustainability does not come with its own rules of implementation. In common with other normative principles, deliberation is required to apply it to particular circumstances. The collective analogue to this process of deliberation is public discourse and debate, that is democratic decision-making procedures. Making sustainability a co-ordinating social value and practice cannot be left up to ‘specialists’ since it is not simply a matter of expertise but, fundamentally, one of ethical consideration. In many ways its concerns are far too important to be left to scientists, never mind economists! The imperative to conjoin democracy and sustainability is not a contingent, *ad hoc* attempt to dress green principles in the legitimacy of democracy. The issues involved in the translation of sustainability from a political-ethical concept to a regulative social principle, expressed in law and policies, for example, require the deliberation as well as the consent and action of those whose lives will be affected by such a principle.

That sustainability is a normative concept should be obvious. It embodies a particular moral attitude to the future, expressing how much we care for and are willing to make sacrifices for our descendants and how, and to what degree, non-humans figure in this process. Given the great power the present generation has over the welfare (and composition) of future generations, there is a consensus within green theory that with this capacity and knowledge of its likely effects comes a large degree of moral responsibility. Following on from this, the ethics of sustainability is partly concerned with how the current generation has duties (generally of a negative kind) to future generations. Arguments from sustainability usually propose wide-ranging changes in the present organisation of society, particularly the economy–ecology relationship, in the name of those yet to be born. The consequences of realising sustainability in social practices are so wide-spread,
and the issues raised so important, that the elaboration of the ‘common good’ it refers to deserves democratic institutions that encourage the active participation of all concerned. But even if we agree on this general outline, and accept it as a principle that ought (in a moral as well as a prudential sense) to be socially instantiated, we have only begun the fleshing out process. For a start, as it stands it is far too abstract, being silent on many things. How far in the future must we look? One, three or fifty generations hence? What are we to pass on? What sacrifices are ruled out?

Such questions cannot be answered scientifically or metaphysically (that is objectively given), but because of their normative content they can only be articulated politically (that is intersubjectively created). And for traditional reasons we can say that this political process ought to be a democratic one. In one sense greens can ask why they should find new grounds for their adherence to democracy different from those advanced by socialists or liberals? The indeterminacies thrown up by sustainability require political adjudication, and given that the policies flowing from any conception of sustainability are likely to have a widespread social impact, leaving few citizens’ lives untouched, it is uncontroversial to hold that they should have some say in the articulation and formulation of this social principle. That is to say the indeterminacy of the principle calls for citizen deliberation, while its translation into policies and laws call for their consent and equally important their active participation in realising it.

An objective account of sustainability, for example, can be seen as partly underwriting the ecoauthoritarian case, which involves sacrificing such values as democracy, liberty and equality, and is heavily dependent on political coercion in the name of ecological sustainability (Ophuls 1977; Heilbroner 1980). The problem with this conception is that it misconstrues the green case as concerned principally with the mere survival of our species for as long as possible on this planet. But as Roberts points out, ‘Other animals may obey the simple dictum, “Above all, survive!” but the human animal tends to ask, “Survive as what?”’ (1979: 10). If sustainability is conceived purely in terms of maintaining the ecological conditions for the infinite continuation of the human species, taking this as the primary green political value does open the possibility of a gap between democracy and green politics. The utilitarian logic of such an interpretation of green politics does imply an instrumental rather than a principled acceptance of democracy. But a purely utilitarian-coercive understanding of sustainability is unlikely to command consensus in public deliberation. If sustainability is viewed as combining democratic decision making (in terms of procedure) and intergenerational justice and moral concern for non-humans (in terms of substantive outcomes), it can act as the touchstone of green political theory. We could then reject conceptions of sustainability that are undemocratically arrived at (as in the ecoauthoritarian case) or imply unjust treatment of the future or unjustifiable use of non-humans.

It is the indeterminacy and uncertainty entailed by sustainability that means that it must be subject to political deliberation. Politics is an extension of ethics,
and in the face of uncertainties it is the only defensible form our dependence on each other can take. The politics of sustainability is therefore a complex combination of democracy, normative claims and counter-claims, as well as questions of science and economics. In other words, it is concerned with the democratic articulation of questions of judgement, a public, political discourse of amateurs/citizens and only subsequently a (largely private) discourse of experts. By portraying it as a political question we avoid crude technocratic solutions, and by then portraying it as a particular type of political problem, that is democratic, we avoid the ecoauthoritarian scenario, which is often a sub-set of the technocratic approach.³

**DISCURSIVE DESIGNS: FORMS OF DEMOCRACY**

Having shown that the discourse of sustainability requires political articulation, and one that should be democratic given its impact on citizens, the particular form of democratic decision making and collective dialogue appropriate for sustainability needs to be examined. Here the concern is with assessing the common perception that green democratic theory must be some variation of direct democracy. With the state and citizen playing such a central role, representative forms of democracy are perhaps more central to green concerns than is usually thought.⁴

One of the arguments in favour of representative democracy is that unlike participatory or direct forms, the ‘ politicisation of everyday life’ is not one of its goals. The disputes that occur within representative democracy are probably less intense than those that are likely to occur in the face-to-face context of Barber’s ‘strong democracy’ (1984), or the small-scale, decentralised, self-sufficient communities that pepper the green political literature. In such a context it is often difficult to distinguish a fellow citizen’s opinions from her as an individual, and while respect should always be shown to the individual independent of her particular views, under direct democratic conditions this important distinction may become blurred at least and perhaps ruptured. It is arguable that direct democracy works best where there is already a large degree of agreement between participants, and that representative forms are more suited to pluralist and heterogeneous collectivities.⁵ The guiding logic should be that the problems of democracy cannot be assumed to be solved simply by more democracy. Accepting this idea implies that indirect forms of democratic participation can and should be included within arguments for, and the presentation of, ‘green democracy’. Direct democracy must, as Saward (1993) reminds us, be distinguished from participatory democracy, and it seems more realistic to assert that green democracy implies that representative institutions will be supplemented by participatory democracy, rather than transcended by a direct democracy. That is, a green conception of participatory democracy is compatible with, and indeed politically will rely upon, extending and adapting traditional liberal democratic institutions (see De Geus and Saward in this volume).
However, there is an argument to be made to the effect that those more affected by a particular policy or decision ought to have more say than those who are only marginally affected. The premise of green democrats is the idea that all those affected should be considered as the relevant *demos* and that decision-making should be made at the lowest level possible (Dobson 1990:125; Porritt 1984:165–8; Irvine and Ponton 1988:78). This implies that democratic decision making for some issues, that is, those of a transnational nature, transcends the nation-state, because the effects of its decisions transcend its jurisdiction. Here the advantages of representative forms of democracy are obvious, in this case the state can act as advocate for its affected citizens. On the other hand, in the interest of proportionality and equal consideration of interests, there are strong grounds for holding that those more affected by a decision ought to have more say than those who are not. This appeal to proportionality and fairness is at root one of justice rather than democracy-as-procedure. To give those not affected by a decision equal say as those for whom the consequences are potentially life threatening, for example, would be to treat the latter unequally. In other words the appropriate *demos* must be dependent upon and sensitive to the particular issue involved. Green democracy and considerations of justice may be said to be intertwined. Simply because a decision is democratically made is no guarantee of its moral worth. Understood in this way, the argument for the discursive understanding of sustainability is compatible with, and indeed will practically require, both representative and more direct forms of democratic participation.  

Another consideration is the importance of stability for any coherent political theory, especially democratic ones. According to Elster, ‘All democracies, whether direct or indirect, have had some stabilizing devices to prevent all issues from being up for grabs by simple majority voting all the time’ (1991:130). Of such stabilising devices, a written constitution embodying the basic law of the land, setting out the political relationship between citizen and state and between citizens, is arguably of most interest and concern for green politics, especially in regard to freedom of information and access to policy-making procedures. The significance of constitutional democracy is that it can include an ‘ecological contract’ between citizens and state, which sets out the nexus of rights and duties that constitute citizenship as a political and social relation. Apart from embodying the present generation’s obligations to the future, a constitution could also be considered as expressing a society’s considered and deliberated moral attitude to non-humans. That is, in so far as we can consider both non-humans and future human descendants ‘moral subjects’ (worthy of moral consideration but not morally responsible agents), a constitution can provide some legal protection for these vulnerables. There is nothing startling about this since such legal incorporations are common features of liberal democratic polities. We can think of this as involving constitutional provisions for the representation of the interests of non-humans as well as future citizens.  

Here there may be scope for thinking that under deliberative or discursive conditions such an ‘ecological contract’ can be expected to express a concern with
the ‘ecological common good’ and articulate ‘generalisable’ rather than ‘particular’ interests. As Dryzek notes, ‘Clearly any policy that realizes general as opposed to particular interests is going to stand ecological concerns in good stead’ (1987:204). For him deliberative or discursive forms of democracy are more effective in developing ecologically rational forms of human-nature exchanges. Democratic institutions function analogously to ecosystems in that both are essentially concerned with transmitting ‘information’ (understood in the widest sense) acting as feedback mechanisms for the ‘system’ as a whole. Deliberative democracy should not, therefore, be interpreted as a demand for direct democracy, as opposed to more participatory democratic practice, where representative democratic institutions can be supplemented with more discursive institutional forms and of course greater citizen involvement in political and non-political spheres.

PREFERENCE TRANSFORMATION AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

One of the questions green politics addresses, and upon which its practical success depends, is expressed in Elster’s statement that ‘the central concern of politics should be the transformation of preferences rather than their aggregation’ (1983:35). Part of the reasoning behind this is that behavioural changes motivated by the internalisation of particular normative orientations is more effective and longer lasting than behavioural changes based on external or coercive imposition. In other words, changing one’s lifestyle or pattern of consumption in the interests of sustainability is more effective if done out of a sense that one believes it is right to do so rather than because one is told to do so, or because it is simply expedient to do so. Sustainability policies then become less a modus vivendi or a prudential strategy, but more akin to an ecological version of a Rawlsian ‘overlapping consensus’. But for this to work people must be genuinely committed to the moral rightness, rather than a begrudging acceptance, of, for want of a better word, the political ‘sense’ of sustainabilty. The rejection of utilitarian or economistic type reasoning, which relies on preference aggregation, is one of the hallmarks of democratic green politics, as the critique of the survivalist and utilitarian reasoning behind the ecoauthoritarian conception of sustainability demonstrated above. Preferences do not automatically command respect, but especially where they have other-regarding effects, they do require public justification. In other words, the reasons people give for their particular desires, ways of life, are important; the strength with which they hold these preferences is irrelevant to democratic decision making. To premise democracy on the idea that strength of belief ought to be recognised is to undermine the democratic principle of equality, as expressed in Bentham’s classic formulation that ‘each to count for one, and none for more than one’. The question of preference transformation involves judging preferences since actions, lifestyles, practices based on individual preference have, in our increasingly interdependent social and ecological world, wide-ranging effects on the lives of others.
The centrality of citizenship to sustainability comes from the belief that its achievement will require major institutional restructuring of contemporary western liberal democracies both internally and externally in their relationship to the rest of the world. However, institutional changes are not enough, and the contention is that such macro-level reorganisation needs to be supplemented with changes at the local and more importantly at the micro-level of individual citizens. Of particular significance here is the practice of citizenship and the role of active citizens. Citizenship is understood as a mediating practice which connects the individual and the institutional levels of society, as well as a common identity which links otherwise disparate individuals together as a collectivity with common interests. Citizenship is of course an integral part of any theory of democracy and the relationship between citizenship and the elaboration and realisation of sustainability is used to suggest a way of firmly establishing the democratic credentials of green politics.

The green claim to a principled as opposed to an instrumental adherence to democracy is that ‘democratic will formation’ permits the possibility that the preferences of individuals may be altered. Preference change is not a central aspect of sustainable development, given that the latter is largely concerned with finding ‘supply-side’ solutions to environmental problems, but it is a central consideration of sustainability. In this sense democratic citizenship may be understood as a form of social learning, the socialisation of ‘ecological citizens’ in response to ecological conditions and concerns. Citizenship as an activity can be thought of as a means to, and a constitutive aspect of, the public elaboration of ‘ecological rationality’. This is defined by Dryzek as ‘the capacity of human and natural systems in combination to cope with problems’ (1987:11). In other words, the normative claims inherent within sustainability require public validation and debate, while the realisation of that collectively decided conception of sustainability requires citizen activism premised on the transformation rather than the mere articulation and aggregation of preferences.

In raising questions of intergenerational and international justice as well as moral claims on behalf of non-humans, sustainability captures the overarching direction of green politics. The immanent relationship between sustainability and democracy lies first in the prioritisation of the conjoint claims of both democracy and justice and second in seeing that citizen deliberation as well as consent and action are necessary for the realisation of green social aims. The role of the citizen is essential both on the ‘input’ and ‘output’ side. Democratic norms can be considered as the appropriate criteria for judging collective decision-making processes, while considerations of justice are often the most appropriate criteria for assessing the outcomes of such procedures.8

Apart from the intended or unintended effects of satisfying individual preferences, there are other difficulties with a politics that relies heavily on their aggregation. One is the contestable social ontology and view of the self that such a politics presupposes. In common with economistic reasoning, utilitarian-based politics is more concerned with states of affairs than with individuals (even though
it is individualistic) who create or are the ‘bearers’ of those affairs. Another is the idea that preferences are fixed, simply given as the raw datum of politics. Preferences are important, but their articulation and justification ought to be seen as a crucial constitutive part of politics itself rather than being viewed as beyond (or before) politics. They are not ‘given’ but need to be justified and are thus open to change. The advantage of focusing on preferences is that it is generally easier to reach compromise where preferences as opposed to principles are at stake. That is, in so far as green democracy seeks to change preferences in a green direction rather than, for instance, opposing such basic moral principles as liberty, equality and autonomy, it is harder to criticise it on democratic grounds. The importance of questioning the exclusive attachment of some greens to radical forms of democracy lies in the central place occupied by preference formation and transformation within strong green arguments for democracy. Representative forms of democracy can act as filters for irrational and unreasonable desires, while also facilitating discussion and debate.

Aggregative strategies are also inferior to transformative strategies because in the provision of public goods, such as environmental protection, they are more likely to result in the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin 1968). Enhanced democratic institutions which stress citizen activity and deliberation on collective issues are more likely to avoid the prisoner’s dilemma (Elster 1983) with regard to environmental problems. Communicative rationality makes it less likely that the collective result will be ecologically irrational. The ecoauthoritarians’ formulation of the para-digmatic ecological problem in terms of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ can be criticised therefore for not making any allowance for purposeful communication between individual users of the commons. It simply assumes a prisoner’s dilemma scenario with mutually disinterested and non-communicating ‘rational individuals’. However, by introducing a communicative dimension, an intersubjective realm is created which permits the co-ordination of individual activity in such a way that the aggregate effect of individual behaviour is not, as in the tragedy scenario, both collectively and individually undesirable. Democracy understood as communication (Dryzek 1990) together with democratic citizenship as part of a social learning process provides some evidence that individuals can deliver enhanced environmental public goods and avoid or limit environmental public bads. This is partly because democracy allows preferences, expectations and behaviour to be altered as a result of debate and persuasion, binding individual behaviour to conform to publicly agreed norms. Democratic citizenship in short permits the possibility of the voluntary creation and maintenance of an ecologically rational social-nature interaction, informed by moral as well as scientific considerations. This is because it is communicative rather than instrumental rationality which characterises ecological rationality and the possible realisation of sustainability.
CITIZEN AND STATE

In comparison with anarchistic versions of green politics, the account presented here sees green politics as compatible with and indeed requiring a commitment to state or state-like institutions. The reason for this is that the state is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the elaboration of discourses of sustainability in the public sphere of modern liberal democracies. The state envisaged here is an ‘enabling’ one, one bound by the rule of law, with a constitution that embodies the outcome of citizen deliberation. So long as we acknowledge the inevitability of pluralism in modern societies and attach value to it, yet are also committed to democracy, the state is the obvious agent with the legitimacy and resources to make these social principles operable. A democratised, decentralised state and civil society would seem to fit best the demands of ‘green democracy’ and the achievement of sustainability.

However, the state is limited in what it can do. Even if we were to accept the legitimacy of the ecoauthoritarian solution, it is still the case that the state by itself cannot control or dictate all the necessary social, economic and political practices that sustainability will require. For example, in a world of other states and a global market, the additional variable of ecosystems is simply another aspect of the external world that the individual state cannot control. This is where citizenship is important. Given that the state cannot do everything, there is an increased need for citizens, both individually and in association with others, to do their bit for the environment.

Traditional conceptions of citizenship define it in terms of rights, with citizenship understood as the right to have rights. This is a narrow understanding of what it means to be a citizen, a minimal view of citizenship typically associated with liberalism. With little or no demands on them apart from tax-paying and obeying the laws, the relationship between private citizens and the liberal state becomes distant and formal. This may have to do with the increasing pluralisation of society within contemporary liberal democracies, and the consequent and continuing ‘emptying out’ of any substantive content to citizenship. As such the emaciation of citizenship may be accounted for in terms of the fragmentary nature of such societies. However, Arblaster’s observation that ‘Perhaps it is only because the duties of citizenship have been reduced to a minimum…that they [liberal democracies] survive as unitary states at all’ (1987:67) is telling. Citizenship as viewed by green democratic theory emphasises the duty of citizens to take responsibility for their actions and choices, and also an obligation to ‘do one’s bit’ in the collective enterprise of achieving sustainability. There is thus a notion of ‘civic virtue’ within a green conception of citizenship. This implies that the duties of being a citizen go beyond the formal political realm, including, for example, such activities as recycling and energy conservation. In these cases there are roles for both the formal institutions of local and central government, the constitution, and the judiciary, as well as for more informal institutions of community, and the opinions of fellow citizens, which would help to prevent ‘free-riding’ by individuals
and groups: that is to say a sustainable legal/state apparatus will also need to encourage a ‘sustainability culture’. The role of the citizen and the practice of citizenship is constitutive of the latter by building an agreed ‘sense of sustainability’ on a notion of ‘civic virtue’, as well as performing the democratic function of a feedback loop between state and civil society.

Another role for the citizen is to take part in the general political debate around sustainability, that is to engage in the different facets of this debate where, according to Barber, ‘[The citizen’s] task is to judge, evaluate and assess—to employ judgement rather than expertise’ (1984:289). Democracy in its various forms is a way of bringing expert and lay citizens together in a (hopefully) mutually enriching context. But the final decision is left to all citizens, not the experts or the highly motivated. However, in the elaboration of sustainability a people may democratically decide on a policy of ‘discounting the future’, but this would violate the claims of the future to a just provision for their welfare. As Rawls notes, ‘In the case of the individual, pure time preference is irrational…. In the case of society, pure time preference is unjust’ (1972:295). Where the outcomes are the main concern, their assessment cannot be on democratic criteria, since these apply to procedures rather than substantive outcomes. It is to justice that we must look for criteria for assessing outcomes. This is why greens need a theory of justice to complement their democratic credentials and ecological concerns.

CONCLUSION

The strategy of this chapter has been to argue for shifting the arena of debate about sustainability from science and economics to the political-ethical realm. And for reasons outlined this shift leads on to posit democratic as opposed to non-democratic forms of decision making. From this democratic conception then comes its translation into the legal or constitutional realm of society, becoming part of an ‘ecological social contract’ between the state and the (active) responsible citizen. So the process is from the moral to the political/democratic realm and then from the legislative to the legal/constitutional. In this constitutional provision and policy implementation the present expresses its duties of justice to future citizens, as well as allowing space for collective duties to non-humans. But it is not simply the case that sustainability would be imposed from above by constitutional statutes, although this might be the case in situations of conflict between the demands of sustainability and other social values. Making the activism of citizens central gives the type of democratic processes being intimated here an interactive communicative dimension in which democracy is conceived of as a two-way process, a reciprocal flow of communication and information between institutions and citizens. With active citizen involvement at the deliberative stage the translation of agreed principle into policy will be less difficult since citizens will be morally, as well as legally, bound to that decision, since they are required to act according to principles they themselves have prescribed. This seems to indicate another way in which democracy and sustainability are linked. Under non-
democratic conditions responsibility for the common good, including the ecological commons, cannot find an interactive, collective expression, in the sense that the state can always be blamed, thus relieving citizens of the onus to take responsibility. Under a non-democratic regime being denied rights would imply that duties lose their moral, although they may still retain their legal, or de facto, force. Yet, as argued earlier, it is action motivated by a sense of moral rightness rather than expediency or coercion that is essential to the politics of sustainability. Sustainability demands that citizens fulfil their duties, but this is premised on citizens’ rights being protected, and democracy is the obvious candidate as the political system to articulate this, as it is centred on the balancing of rights and duties. As such sustainability indicates that citizens are each others’ keepers, and deliberative or discursive forms of participatory democracy provide the means through which this particularly modern form of interdependence can find expression.

The social goal of sustainability as opposed to either the technocratic/economistic discourse of ‘sustainable development’ or the utopian discourse of the ‘sustainable society’ is a defensible way for green politics to integrate its commitment to justice and democracy. Talking about the political sense of sustainability gets green politics away from the often fruitless preoccupation with developing ‘greenprints’ for the future society.

In the discourse of sustainability the interplay between expertise and judgement is clear. Its indeterminacy should be seen both as inevitable and indicating a necessary degree of flexibility that is an advantage rather than a deficiency. As a political-moral question sustainability is sufficiently wide-ranging that both human and non-human welfare can be accommodated and brought into fruitful relation with each other. In bringing together these different but intimately related areas, the politics of sustainability express the attempt to cope with the contingencies of ‘being in the world’, that is, being a ‘citizen-in-society-in-environment’.

The discussion also highlights a particular feature of green political theory that is so obvious that its significance is often overlooked. In its concern for those who cannot speak, either because they are yet to be born (future generations), are incapable (non-humans), or are denied citizenship (affected foreigners), green politics can be characterised as the ‘politics of advocacy’. That is, it attempts to bring into the political realm previously excluded others. Its concern is such that it seeks to represent these non-citizens, protecting their interests where possible, or limiting negative consequences. This view implies that green theorists ought to look more favourably upon representative forms of democracy as well as extra-democratic institutions such as constitutions and the legal system, while acknowledging the potential ecological and democratic benefits of the state as the co-ordinator and bearer of the collective will. But perhaps the most significant import of this perspective is that the legal sphere is extremely important for green politics, and perhaps more important than previously thought.
What the discussion indicates is that by itself sustainability, the preservation and conservation of a viable environment fit for human and non-human welfare and fulfilment, is not only indeterminate in its definition and translation into policies, programmes and practices: from the perspective of green political theory as a whole, its status as ‘the’ green value is itself indeterminate. Simply put, placing a premium on sustainability does not, ceteris paribus, give us a reason why it ought to be a regulative social principle. What makes it something good is the value we place on that which is to be sustained. Sustainability per se is a value intensifier, but it is only if we value what is sustained, that we can answer the question why it ought to be sustained. The open-endedness of the principle implies that greens should not couch their positions in terms of sustainability without also indicating how it relates to commitments to democracy and justice. It is only by this process that green politics can be understood, as I believe it must, as a politics of the ‘common good’ as well as a politics of the ‘ecological commons’.

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NOTES

1 Pearce et al. dismiss the notion of sustainability as a policy aim because for them it implies a commitment to a no-growth economy with an implied coercive demand for radically altered lifestyles (1993:4–5). Sustainable development, because it proposes that economic growth is compatible with less resource use, is for them a much more attractive policy goal. However, as used here, sustainability is distinguished from sustainable development for the purpose of highlighting the full range of normative issues expressed and suppressed in the politics and discourse of sustainability. What this distinction seeks to bring out is the non-technical, extra-economic dimensions of the debate, particularly those which relate to democracy.

2 A lurking utilitarian logic may partly explain Saward’s doubts about the status of democracy within the green political canon. Defining democracy as ‘responsive rule’, as he does (1993:68–9), could be interpreted as placing greater value upon the ‘responsiveness’ of rulers to the preferences of citizens, than upon how and more to the point why such responsiveness is actualised. If we are concerned about preference fulfilment we could argue that the real issue is not the type of government, but its scale/size. Osterfeld’s conviction that ‘Provided that exit is not barred, a large democracy would be less responsive, and therefore provide less utility to its citizens, than a local dictatorship’ (1989:155) could be said to be sensitive to the importance of ‘responsiveness’. In other words, democracy as ‘responsive rule’ may imply an instrumental as opposed to principled valuation. Following on from this we may question Saward’s view that ‘there is a natural compatibility between liberalism and
democracy which does not obtain between ecologism and democracy’ (1993:69). If, however, democracy is understood as giving those affected by a decision a say in its formulation and implementation, we could say that on this understanding ecologism may fare better than liberalism.

3 For an introduction to the relationship between technocratic approaches and authoritarian politics see O’Riordan (1981).

4 I do not wish to be interpreted as arguing that representative institutions are to be viewed as transitionary modes to more radical forms, although this is of course possible. I feel, and I give some indication later why, representative forms in a pluralist society will always be necessary, and that in terms of politically raising the issue of the moral status of non-humans, representative institutions have their benefits.

5 One could say that direct democracy is more concerned with the expression of communal identity than as a non-coercive decision-making mechanism.

6 The decentralisation of the state may be an important feature in the formation of a coherent sustainability programme in that it frees central government to a large extent. It allows central government to ‘plan’ and co-ordinate, while leaving the details up to local communities, government and institutions.

7 Although beyond this chapter, there is reason to think that as well as different democratic institutions, there may be different democratic decision criteria that a comprehensive account of sustainability may merit. For example, it might be that simple majorities will not be acceptable for deciding a referendum on a national ‘sustainability plan’, where a two-thirds or three-quarters majority (or perhaps consensus) is more appropriate. See Tannsjo for further discussion (1992:48).

8 Defined in this way sustainability could answer Goodin’s (1992) conundrum concerning the non-derivability of outcomes from procedural constraints. The paradox he cites is that ‘To advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes: what guarantee can we have that the former procedures will yield the latter sorts of outcomes?’ (1992:168). This is where questions of justice which go beyond, but do not necessarily conflict with, ‘procedural’ democracy are important. Decision making, the results of which affect large numbers of people and/or are binding on them, cannot be assessed in terms of procedural requirements alone. From the point of view of green political theory taken as a whole, questions of democracy cannot be divorced from those of justice and wider moral considerations (Mills, Chapter 5). For this reason, ‘extra democratic’ institutions such as a constitution (Saward, Chapter 4) and a legal apparatus are important (or ought to be) for democratic greens (Eckersley, Chapter 11).

9 We could envisage a statutory duty on behalf of citizens to take part in various forums that a full elaboration of sustainability will require, along the lines perhaps of compulsory voting. This requirement is not a case of forcing people to be politically active, but can be thought of as a legitimate duty that can be expected from citizens. The minimum that may be expected of citizens may be to vote in referenda and local/national/transnational elections, and perhaps attend public inquiries.

10 The practice of sustainability, on enlightened anthropocentric grounds, will by and large have a positive impact in terms of the protection of non-humans, especially those critical to ecosystemic functions. Coupled with our ignorance of the complexity of such life-support systems we have a prima facie reason not to deplete the biodiversity of the planet.
It is important to point out that the inclusion of non-humans is indirect while that of future generations is direct. That is whereas we include future generations in the elaboration of sustainability as members of the ‘community of justice’, the inclusion of non-humans is a matter of (some of) them being included as members of the ‘moral community’. Thus even though both non-humans and future generations can be classed as ‘moral subjects’ as opposed to moral agents, how we treat human moral subjects will be different to non-human moral subjects. Whereas we can consider future generations as potential citizens, it does not make sense to talk of non-humans being potential citizens. This has the implication that to the extent that considerations of justice become important to green politics the more greens will have to address the inevitability of weak anthropocentrism. However, arguing for the legal incorporation of non-humans, which expresses a community’s collective moral valuation of non-humans, may be a more fruitful way of going about this, than attempting to include them directly as recipients of justice.

A comprehensive account of this would perhaps lead green politics to a quasi-Rousseauean concern with the democratic articulation of the ‘general will’, as opposed to the empirical ‘will of all’. Given the emphasis of this chapter on ‘public talk’, discourse, persuasion and preference alteration this is hardly surprising.

REFERENCES


