Pastures Green

Jess Walker talks to Charles Birch - scientist, environmentalist and recent winner of theology's equivalent to the Nobel Peace Prize.

To many environmentalists, it's possible that Charles Birch is a complete unknown. He shouldn't be; he's part of their history. Charles Birch was espousing environmental issues way back in the early 'seventies when 'green' just meant the colour of grass, not a political complexion.

Perhaps it's partly because the environment finally has become fashionable, and not fringe, that Birch, an ecologist and theologian, was recently awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. This is in spite of radical theological views that prompt him to such aphorisms as "two very important forces in the world today for good and evil, are religion and science". But Birch has long been regarded by his peers as something of an outsider, a tag he doesn't mind at all. "In a way I'd be afraid to be put up in the fold too much", he reflects, using an appropriately biblical metaphor.

His environmentalism developed as a natural consequence of his profession as an ecologist. (He is emeritus professor of Biology at Sydney University.) A friend and ally of Paul Erlich, his analysis of the environmental crisis is similar: that the human impact on the environment is completely unbalanced. In the early seventies he was part of a World Council of Churches committee which examined the Club of Rome's 1970 report, Limits to Growth. The concept they came up with, at a 1974 conference, was 'ecologically sustainable development', the now familiar catchphrase that has, Birch thinks, been much abused. And its fellow notion, 'sustainable economic development', (of Mr Keating et al), has rather missed the point.

Needless to say, Birch is critical of unbridled growth and says that the rich world, as he calls it, must reduce its overall standard of living. "The standard of living is just a measure of material goods and we need a certain level of that. But once it keeps on going up, the quality of life goes down. I bet Mr Bond's quality of life has really shot down in recent years!"

The challenge really, is how to globally redistribute wealth - a familiar problem for the Left.

But Birch doesn't talk very much in the concrete terms the green movement has had to become used to of jobs, the economy, utilisation of natural resources or electoral politics. Values and ethics are his preserve. In this respect he's part of a new trend that seems to be emerging in green politics: the call for a fundamental shift in values and worldview. Environmentalists with the clout of Peter Garret or David Suzuki say that this is essential to our surviving the looming environmental crisis. In an interview with Simply Living last year, Garret made this point: "I think what we're trying to see happen is not simply the replacement of one group of pressure politics by another...That's not going to be sufficient to save this earth. Something deeper, something which requires a greater shift in perception and action has got to take place."

Though the green movement has secular roots, environmentalists seeking to justify their actions and to develop a theoretical base have looked to moral and religious philosophy. Many have felt a need to express their relationship to the natural world in spiritual terms - and are frequently derided for it.

Birch believes the greens have found little comfort in Christianity, and is not surprised that they generally turn away from it. Greens are more likely to look to Eastern and indigenous religions, (or in the case of eco-feminism, to matriarchal mythology), for inspiration and validation.

Some, like David Suzuki, draw spiritual inspiration from science itself, and seek to reform science in much the same way that Birch attacks Christian dogma.

Birch believes that Christianity can offer something to the greens, but not in its present form. Christianity, he
says, must be radically reformed to become "bio-centred", or life-centred, rather than remaining a human-centred religion with no respect for the rest of creation.

Clearly, there's nothing wrong with making the elimination of human oppression and poverty a priority but this need not exclude environmental concerns. Christianity should not exclude them, for its own health, according to Birch. The greens, on the other hand, could broaden their agenda to include these traditionally Christian concerns of social justice. Birch would like to see the two get together.

The problem, as he sees it, is that Christianity and western science share a materialist, mechanistic tradition which sees the world as a machine leaving no room for the mind, consciousness or emotions - all the facets of life which are beyond measurement. Nature exists to be exploited, the mechanistic world view doesn't consider that it has an intrinsic value.

Hence what Birch sees as the neglect of an important argument for conservation: "let's look after nature because it's valuable in itself, to itself". This is the sort of argument that's brought up in defence of preserving places like Antarctica or the Tasmanian south west forests as pristine wilderness. It doesn't seem to make much headway. Even the slightly utilitarian 'think how much we can learn from them if we leave them intact - we might find a cure for AIDS', usually brought up in defence of tropical rainforests, doesn't get very far in bulldozer economies that want or need an immediate return.

The complexities of it all are enough to give anyone a headache, but Birch is cautiously optimistic about the future. "Things are changing", he says, "because individuals form grassroots movements around the world. In the last decade, all changes have come from the bottom up." Governments have only responded to change, not initiated it. There are also movements for change in both science and religion, but these are not generally supported by the scientific and religious communities. Anyone who challenges the accepted dogma - Birch in Christianity, Suzuki in science - is out on a limb.

Through public lectures, books, and his position on a sub-committee of the World Council of Churches, (for Science, Technology and the Environment), Birch has been trying broaden the Christian agenda. You might say he acts as Christianity's environmental conscience. "Humans aren't the only pebbles on the cosmic beach", he says, and all life has value to God. Buddhism and many forms of Hinduism recognise this. If Birch had been born in Asia perhaps he would now be a Buddhist, but in Australia it's Christianity that's necessarily provided his spiritual inspiration and support.

Being committed to a religion of which he is strongly critical is not such a contradiction. Birch is trying to remind the church that Christianity does have a "bio-centred" tradition that reaches back as far as the Old Testament, and is certainly present in the teachings of Jesus. Unfortunately for Christians, he says, there aren't many Christian books on the theme of reverence for life. (His most recent book, On Purpose, is a contribution to that small collection.)

Another problem is what you might call the church's daggy image. Birch put it rather more kindly, "when the churches do speak (on this issue), they speak in such a funny language - all 'glory of god' and that sort of thing". His judgement is that "the church is miles behind, and it should be right up the front". If the ideas of Charles Birch have any influence, it probably will be.
Worms are turning in Little England. Travelling down from Heathrow Airport to the Sussex coast by way of the Surrey Weald and the South Downs, I was reminded of the important role that this sort of landscape has played in English political culture.

A preferred and dominant image of 'Englishness' is to be found in this rolling green landscape, in the well-organised and deferential dormitory towns of London's southern 'gin and tonic belt', in the seventeenth century hamlets and villages and the occasional twelfth-century church. The more like a tourist brochure it looks, the surer you can be that this is conservative heartland. At least this used to be a fair rule of thumb.

But the ancient tranquility has been disturbed. At the Parish of Eriswell in rural Suffolk, street lights are going out on US servicemen's estates. In Oxfordshire, Tory councillors have resigned en masse. The sturdy and blue-rinse members of the Morecambe Conservative Club in Lancashire have just voted overwhelmingly to withhold their dues from the local Conservative Association. The reason? What one of the members of the Morecambe club, a lifelong Tory and retired pensioner, called "unjust, unfair, and immoral, based on hypocrisy, lies and greed"; the Community Charge or, as it is universally and pejoratively known, the poll tax.

The poll tax is the Thatcher government's scheme for funding the activities of local government. It replaces the old domestic rating system where revenue was raised on the basis of property values and introduces a system where individuals over the age of eighteen are levied at a flat rate. Hence the designation 'poll tax' since it is based on all of the names listed in the electoral register rather than those designated as householders. While putatively egalitarian insofar as it applies to everybody of voting age, the charge is not income or asset related. To return to that journey through the South Downs, if you were to drive through a small and ancient town called Petworth, you would pass an enormous Elizabethan Manor House. On the way out of the town you would pass some nineteenth century labourers' cottages and, further on, some twentieth century council houses.

After the introduction of the Community Charge on April 1, you may be sure of one thing: that all is equal in this quiet town, that the occupants of all of those dwellings who are of voting age will be paying the same amount towards local government expenditure. In the most frequently cited case, the Duke of Westminster, owner of large tracts of London real estate and Britain's wealthiest man, will be paying the same Community Charge as his gardener.

This extraordinarily inequitable scheme has become Margaret Thatcher's potential Waterloo, and a political and administrative nightmare. The lights on the US servicemen's estate in Suffolk are going out, not in protest at their presence on British soil, but because they cannot be levied under the poll tax whereas previously they did pay domestic rates. The local council just cannot afford to provide free street-lighting under the new scheme. The same is true of Upper Heyford in Oxfordshire where the loss of US
servicemen's contributions has meant a 400% increase in average parish rates. Compounding the problems is the parallel introduction of a new Uniform Business Rate whereby rates for businesses will go straight to central government rather than to the local authority. Thus, the Parish of Winfrith in Dorset will lose 80% of its income because it can no longer levy charges on the UK Atomic Energy Establishment within its boundaries.

The government claims that these inequities will be ironed out through various rebate schemes for those on low incomes and through enhancement of central government funding enabled by the Uniform Business Rate. But Scotland, where the poll tax was introduced last year, would suggest that this is wishful thinking in the extreme. The Strathclyde region with about 1.74 million or 40% of the total eligible Scottish population has registered 394,000 defaulters on the tax. This is a default rate of 22%. Wages and bank accounts are being 'arrested' but this is going to be an enormously costly exercise, and not isolated to Scotland.

There are various street-level indicators of the extent of popular concern about, and resistance to, the poll tax. One of these - a real measure - is the extent to which the poll tax, as one of my relatives pointed out, has displaced the weather as the main topic of conversation. Another indicator is the fact that local papers, usually filled with flower shows, fetes and minor misdemeanours, have suddenly sprouted new genres like the political essay, opinion columns and 'we say' letter pages. In the politically quiescent Home Counties it is a revolution indeed.

It is not so much the ideological content of the Community Charge which is surprising as the extent to which it has been so poorly thought through. The central government has estimated that the average national community charge would be £278 per annum ($610) whereas, now that local government authorities have set their charges, this turns out to be £364 ($800). This, remember, is per person and not per household.

No rebate or subsidy can be claimed against anything in excess of the average £278, leaving the great majority of low income earners and fixed income recipients subject to charges of between 20% to 100% higher than their previous rates bills when calculated as a household budget. In addition, rebates can only be claimed on the basis of a two-adult household so multi-occupancy charge-payers, those living in cramped bedsits in a single property or overcrowded homes with adult children, will suffer accordingly.

And so to another poll: the Mid-Staffordshire by-election which some have dubbed the 'Poll Tax Election'. This took place in exemplary Thatcherite country, a combination of semi-rural areas and new housing estates occupied by the skilled working class and lower middle class voters. When it was announced by the Returning Officer that a safe Conservative seat with a majority of 15,000 had been transformed into a Labour seat with a majority of 9,000, the face of the Conservative candidate was something to behold.

If he could have stamped his feet and spat he would have. He denied the victorious Labour candidate Sylvia Heal (a magistrate from Surrey as it happens) any credit and accused the Labour Party of being sham and devoid of policies. It was not the extent of the swing away from the Tories (18%) that mattered since they have suffered swings against them of up to 24% in by-elections before, and still gone on to win General Elections with a landslide. Rather, as political analyst Ivor Crewe argues, "it is the scale of Labour's success, not of Conservative failure, that stands out". Labour gained 24% in the Mid-Staffordshire election. The centre and independent vote for the Social Democrats and the Liberal Democrats which had been the home for disaffected main-party voters for the past seven years or so was effectively obliterated. As the political commentator Peter Kellner put it "the collapse of the centre has moved the winning post at the next General Election". Whereas in Australia a centre vote of around 16% can matter a great deal, in Britain with a first past the post system, it doesn't count for much.

This is, in effect, the biggest swing to Labour for more than 50 years and may signal the return to two-party politics, notwithstanding fragmentary Green gains here and there. These latter will never, of course, amount to anything in a first past the post system. The by-election was followed by a number of national polls. These put Labour between 19-28% ahead of the Conservatives nationally, 61% of voters, including 37% of Tories believe that Thatcher should go before the next election. But there is a tendency to make too much of mid-term by-elections. Dramatic language has been
used. Sylvia Heal, victorious candidate at Mid-Staffordshire, hailed the “beginning of the end of the Dark Ages of Thatcherism”. Commentators have spoken of Rubicons being crossed and of the middle-classes of England being prepared to vote Labour without dallying with centre parties. There is a certain amount of historical amnesia here (forgetting 1945 and 1964, for example). But there may, nonetheless, be evidence of a qualitative shift in voting patterns and a signal that Labour is about to be considered again as a plausible party of government.

But before that point is reached Labour will need to come up with its own answers to the problems which the ill-conceived poll tax was destined to address. The old domestic rating system had many inequities and inefficiencies and local authorities are being progressively deprived of funds. There is much necessary and justifiable debate on what is the most appropriate form of funding for local government; on whether it should be levied on individuals or households in circumstances where the ‘household’ of the traditional male breadwinner with dependents is no longer a useful statistic.

Some Labour shadow ministers are predicting that something like the poll tax will have to be retained, but amended to account for income and assets. For some reason, the idea of a local income tax remains anathema. Perhaps if it were to be called a ‘Community Services and Amenity Rate’, means-tested against income and assets and evaluated against actual provision of amenities and services, this would not be such a problem.

The communities here are being progressively evacuated and replaced by dormitory or commuter populations and this imbalance is having its effects on the custodianship of the surrounding environment which is more and more being designated as of purely ‘heritage’ or tourism attraction.

The issues raised by the uproar over the Community Charge may at least lead to some rethinking of what is involved in being and living in a community and may also serve to tip the scales somewhat against the tendency to turn Britain’s green and pleasant land into a very large theme park.

COLIN MERCER was living in the south of England during the introduction of the Community Charge.

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Brian McGahen

Brian McGahen, gay activist, communist, former City councillor and community activist, and AIDS sufferer, died in Sydney on April 2.

While at high school, Brian joined a suburban peace group, motivated by his belief that the Vietnam war was wrong. A number of communists in that group had a significant influence on him, and, at age 17, he joined the Communist Party.

Brian's experience and activities in the moratorium days were a significant indication of his deeply felt convictions on a range of issues throughout his life.

He was one of a few who actually became a draft resister - refusing to register at all. As his brother Paul McGahen said at Brian's memorial, Brian was a severe asthmatic and had undergone corrective surgery on his chest. He would never have been called up.

He also signed an appeal calling on others not to register. This act of civil disobedience, termed sedition by the government of the day, combined with draft resistance led to a period of arrest, jail and hiding out.

When still a teenager Brian recognised that he was gay and engaged in gay politics within the Communist Party, when the gay and women's liberation struggles began confronting the orthodoxies of the Left, and within the broader community. As Mavis Robertson recounted at his memorial, "Brian took on the fact that Cuba was punishing and jailing gays. It was a time when, within the Left, criticism of Cuba was unusual, to say the least, and when most gays still hadn't come out. Then as now he showed integrity and courage."

His role in the gay liberation struggle in Sydney is renowned, particularly his involvement in establishing the Gay Mardi Gras in 1980, now the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras with its parade, Sleaze Ball and Arts Festival with an international reputation.

But even before that, Brian was a busy activist: in 1973, at a World Youth Festival of young communists in Berlin, Brian and Peter Thatchell handed out a gay liberation/gay rights pamphlet! In 1973, he was involved in David Widdup's campaign in the federal election for Lowe against Billy McMahon, under the slogan 'I've got my eye on Billy's seat'.

In 1985 the AIDS Council of NSW was established, following campaigning by the ad hoc NSW AIDS Action Committee in which Brian was involved.

As David Buchanan said at Brian's memorial service, "Brian saw AIDS as as significant to the gay community as the Holocaust was to the Jewish community. He feared it would decimate the community and would reduce activism. Brian shared the view of all of us that the HIV crisis called for political organisation of a high order." Brian instituted a successful campaign, taken up by ACON, to have made available to a lover or friend of a patient the Carers' Pension, formerly restricted to members of the patient's family. This was only a part of his constant campaigning for empowerment of gays and pride in themselves; as was his belief in euthanasia: "his concerns were the lack of dignity being inflicted by HIV disease and by those who would deny ill people any control over their destiny - not to speak of the pain and suffering being endured by those for whom there was no useful outcome of such torture," David Buchanan said.

He passionately believed in the right to control one's own life; the manner of his own death was a testimony to that. As Mavis Robertson said "courage marks the manner of his death" and "he commands our respect for living and dying by such values."

In 1984 Brian was one of three openly gay people elected to the Sydney City Council. Mavis Robertson said that "he will always be an example because he was the first person in Australia to campaign successfully for public office as a gay activist".

These are only some of the achievements for which Brian will be proudly remembered. Others include: his role as a consultant for the Family and Children's Services Agency during the International Year of the Child; his role in initiating the Social Welfare Workers' Union and being its first secretary; his solidarity work - particularly through producing and selling goods, through the Peacemeal Products venture, with proceeds going to the various groups, and allowing him a degree of financial independence to pursue his interests and commitments. Brian was a member of the New Left Party and was also one of the 21 initial signatories of the Time To Act statement.

Perhaps his finest achievement, however, was the recent establishment of the Sydney Pride Centre. "If anything is testimony to Brian's vision and his role in advancing our interests as a community" it was that, according to David Buchanan.