

Eminence Green

Bob Brown and Peter Singer, The Greens, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 1996

Reviewed by Cathy Buchanan

THERE was a time when one could ignore books such as *The Greens*. In this work, Brown and Singer set forth the philosophy and platform of the Green Party of Australia. The Greens are, by their own admission, rather eccentric nature lovers who spurn middle-class values and culture in favour of low-tech living. Green ideas are not new, nor are they likely to become very popular. But since the Greens have obtained seats in the upper houses of several Australian parliaments, they are in a position to influence government policies.

Understanding the Green philosophy is more difficult than it first appears. *The Greens* contains so many inconsistencies that it is hard to know which assertions are meant to be taken seriously. Thus, the authors claim to be the champions of the ordinary working person and make frequent appeals to the importance of democracy and free choice. Yet they want to deprive working people of many things they enjoy, such as automobiles, televisions, dishwashers and microwave ovens. Brown and Singer maintain that working people have been brainwashed by huge transnational corporations into wanting things they do not need, luxury items such as videocassette players and clothes dryers.

Brown and Singer claim that the Greens are a grass-roots democratic party; every person's voice should be heard; local governments should be strengthened. Yet when the authors discuss enacting any significant legislation, they favour using the federal government to do it. For example, they argue that the federal government should use its powers to regulate trading companies to enforce protection of the environment. The federal government should also increase taxes on the rich and reintroduce death duties as a way of paying for generous social welfare plans. Everyone should be forced to work fewer hours per week and suffer reduced income, in order to ensure a 'fairer distribution of work' (p. 133). Presumably, this would have to be achieved through federal legislation, since if any individual State or local government attempted to pass legislation limiting the working week to 30 hours, it would soon find a mob of consumption-loving workaholic citizens heading for the border, along with companies eager to employ them.

When Brown and Singer discuss the importance of helping poor people in other countries, they note that 'there is no principle of fairness that can justify the gulf between the wealth of most Australians and the poverty of most inhabitants of, say, Bangladesh' (p. 154). Although the authors claim they want to help people in impoverished nations, they also want to increase tariffs on the goods produced by those nations. But this would ensure that the poor countries got poorer and, for good measure, that the average Australian got poorer, too. Prices for goods formerly imported would rise, and Australians would be enticed into less productive

jobs. If the Green philosophy prevails, we will impoverish ourselves while performing the same charitable act on our neighbours.

The most striking inconsistency in *The Greens* concerns the use of Australia's natural resources. After railing against consumerism, destruction of natural resources and failure to preserve the planet 'as we found it', Brown and Singer reassure us that Australia can implement a vast social welfare scheme since it is the richest country in the world. As they note, 'When the value of Australia's assets, including people, land, minerals, railways and water systems were divided by the size of our population, we all turned out to be millionaires, well ahead of our nearest rival, Canada, and almost twice as wealthy as the citizens of the United States' (p. 117). It would be magical indeed if the Greens could make Australians rich from mineral resources that were never taken out of the ground, forests that were never disturbed and land that remained as we found it.

When the Green philosophy is inconsistent, it is merely amusing. When the Green philosophy is coherent, it is truly disturbing. The cult of Mother Earth has returned, and we must worship and protect our goddess at all costs. Human life is nothing special, certainly no more special than that of a frog. While Singer's 1994 book *Rethinking Life and Death* was theoretical in nature, in this work we see an attempt to implement many of his frightening ideas.

Brown and Singer apparently aim to be Green philosopher-senators, helping the ignorant masses realise what they should not want. Understanding the 'paradox of hedonism' (p. 57) will cure people of the disease of consumerism; we will happily turn back the clock to the days before washing machines, stereos and televisions. While this scenario sounds ridiculous, it may yet be realised by Green policies that make us too poor to buy basic conveniences such as cars and white goods.

One can only wonder at Brown and Singer's disregard of the basic facts of economics. They justify their repudiation of economics on the grounds that 'economics is not a science, and most economic prediction is guesswork'. Instead of standard economics, Brown and Singer advocate 'green economics', a system in which the laws of supply and demand apparently do not apply, and the economy is controlled 'democratically' (p. 121).

Many simple and attractive arguments can be made against the radical policies of the Greens, including the obvious one that we are products of nature and thus anything we do is 'natural'. The tragedy of the anti-market approach of the Greens, however, is that environmental problems arise because there are too few markets rather than too many. Resources that are not owned are excessively exploited. The worst environmental problems in the developed world exist in the formerly socialist Eastern Europe. Most progress is being made in solving the 'tragedy of the common' by introducing markets for resources, such as clean air, clean water, fish and other wildlife, that formerly were not owned.

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