

# The Politics of the Environment and the 'Radicalisation' of State Institutions

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## Introduction

It seems that concerns over the environment and global warming are increasingly central to radical politics today. For many commentators, raising awareness about the issue and mainstreaming these concerns within business and institutional programmes seems to be a radical challenge to traditional, more self- or profit-orientated, concerns. This short article seeks to suggest that issues, such as these, are crucial to the political sphere and to the way in which we understand our relationship to others and interact with state institutions. However, it highlights that these shifting frameworks, through which we establish more globalised or ethical conceptions of our duties and responsibilities as citizens, can be seen to play a role in reproducing and legitimising power relations, rather than merely posing a challenge to them. I particularly wish to draw attention to how state institutions have increasingly taken up the environmental agenda, as an attempt to restore their social

legitimacy, and to emphasise some of the limitations of constructing radical politics around this project.

This article will suggest that the traditional social ties that bound liberal state institutions to society, in the post-war social contract of collective advancement, have steadily eroded. The leading role of the liberal state as representative of the collective public good of its citizens and the symbolisation of this in social and welfare institutions has therefore become increasingly problematic. This is nowhere more clear than with health and education, where clear lines of authority and legitimacy have broken down; reflected in the questioning of the authority of the doctor and the professor and the transformation of citizens into consumers, responsible for their own 'life-choices' in our increasingly patient- and student-orientated world.

In the absence of clear collective frameworks of social purpose, which were the basis of state welfare and educational institutions, these public bodies have increasingly sought to derive meaning and legitimacy, less in their concrete social relationship to citizens and instead in more abstract measures, bypassing society and finding meaning and validation independently of their traditional socially mediating role. It is in the context of this search for independent validation that environmental discourses have begun to play a crucial role.

Environmental concerns have become increasingly important as a way of renegotiating the bonds of social connection between liberal state institutions and society. Where traditional indicators of welfare and educational progress appear increasingly contested, more abstract measures of institutional performance, such as their 'carbon footprint', appear to be more meaningful. These external frameworks of measurement appear to be above reproach, not mired in the difficulties of justifying what now appear to be divisive exclusionary and hierarchical approaches with regard to collective state-led approaches to health and education.

This shift towards more global, ethical, or abstract – less socially cohered – forms of legitimisation, it will be argued, is the result of a growing social disconnection between the state and the citizen. The great liberal institutions of the post-war state once symbolised the closeness of the state's relationship to society, bound by a shared project of social improvement; today, the fact that these institutions increasingly find it difficult to directly relate to citizens, and would rather mediate this relationship through global or ethical concerns, such as care for the environment, highlights the fragmentation of meaning and direction in modern society.

## Health

One may have thought that the National Health Service, Britain's flagship national institution was there to serve the health needs of the public. Not according to the latest UK government thinking. Global warming apparently means that the NHS has a new public sector flagship mission - reducing Britain's carbon emissions. Press headlines about hospitals taking meat off menus, in order to cut carbon emissions, do not really do justice to the radical change in approach to how the NHS's contribution to public health is assessed today.<sup>1</sup> The NHS consultation document, *Saving Carbon, Improving Health*<sup>2</sup> published in January 2009, highlights this fundamental shift in the way in which we understand public services and the links between the liberal state and the citizen.

Like every state institution, the National Health Service is feeling the burden of legitimising its role in terms of its specific policy responsibilities. For the NHS, this burden is providing healthcare in a context where the task of health responsibility has already shifted from the state responsibility for improving

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<sup>1</sup> 'Hospitals will take meat off menus in bid to cut carbon', *Guardian*, 26 February 2009.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/jan/26/hospitals-nhs-meat-carbon>

<sup>2</sup> NHS, 'Saving Carbon, Improving Health: A Draft Carbon Reduction Strategy for the NHS in England – a Consultation Document', 27 February 2009.

[http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft\\_nhs\\_carbon\\_reduction\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft_nhs_carbon_reduction_strategy.pdf)

the quality and longevity of our lives to the empowerment of the public to make the right choices for healthy living. For years it has increasingly become our job to make ourselves healthy on the basis of information provided for us in relation to smoking, dieting, exercise etc. This shifting of responsibility, itself reflecting the problems of institutional legitimacy, has made it increasingly difficult for the NHS to find validation on its own terms. In response to this, the NHS has increasingly begun to evaluate its performance in non-health related terms. These performance indicators - of necessity - need to be external to the health service itself; external to the relationship between the NHS and public health.

This externalisation of frameworks of validation has been important in facilitating the mainstreaming of environmental concerns in health service policy-making. One example of this process is the consultation document - the first output of the new NHS Sustainable Development Unit - which, in the foreword by NHS Chief Executive, David Nicholson, argues that: 'Climate change is one of the greatest threats to our health and well-being. In addition, action to tackle climate change offers opportunities to improve our health and well-being and save money.'<sup>3</sup> Nicholson asserts that reducing carbon

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<sup>3</sup> D. Nicholson, Chief Executive, NHS, Foreword, NHS, 'Saving Carbon, Improving Health: A Draft Carbon Reduction Strategy for the NHS in England – a Consultation Document', 27

emissions is a good indicator of both health improvements and efficiency. In fact, carbon emissions are so reliable as a method of evaluating performance that his mission as Chief Executive is to 'reduce our carbon footprint and make the NHS the leading public sector organisation in tackling climate change'.<sup>4</sup>

The language of the report will make compelling reading for anyone looking for insights into why government departments have increasingly begun to talk of their carbon footprints as a key indicator of their value and efficiency. As the report argues, the old NHS was a contract between the state and the citizen: 'An institution that is best about us as a nation and a people.'<sup>5</sup> The new NHS has other relationships at its core. It is not to be judged merely on how it serves the public health, but on its broader remit in the struggle against climate change:

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February 2009, p.1.

[http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft\\_nhs\\_carbon\\_reduction\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft_nhs_carbon_reduction_strategy.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> D, Nicholson, Chief Executive, NHS, Foreword, NHS, 'Saving Carbon, Improving Health: A Draft Carbon Reduction Strategy for the NHS in England – a Consultation Document', 27

February 2009, p.1.

[http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft\\_nhs\\_carbon\\_reduction\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft_nhs_carbon_reduction_strategy.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> NHS, 'Saving Carbon, Improving Health: A Draft Carbon Reduction Strategy for the NHS in England – a Consultation Document', 27 February 2009, p.3.

[http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft\\_nhs\\_carbon\\_reduction\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft_nhs_carbon_reduction_strategy.pdf)

This Strategy aims to achieve two core objectives for the NHS in England in fighting climate change:

- Support all our organisations, people, and partners through the creation of a systematic and measurable approach to carbon reduction for the NHS;
- Position NHS organisations as leaders in the public sector, encouraging and challenging others, in a united front against climate change.<sup>6</sup>

It would be a mistake to see the policy consultation document as mere lip-service to the environmental lobby: many of the proposals involve far reaching changes to the nature of NHS provision, from closing outpatient surgeries to radically reassessing building design. It would also be short-sighted to see this policy document as merely an attempt to present money-saving initiatives in an eco-friendly way – saving on transport costs, buildings and employee hours. There are real limits to the extent to which the NHS can take a lead in cutting back on heating, lighting, running equipment and transportation for hospitals and other services as these are required on a 24/7 basis. If one of

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<sup>6</sup> NHS, 'Saving Carbon, Improving Health: A Draft Carbon Reduction Strategy for the NHS in England – a Consultation Document', 27 February 2009, p.3.

[http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft\\_nhs\\_carbon\\_reduction\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/downloads/draft_nhs_carbon_reduction_strategy.pdf)

Britain's most important state institutions - the NHS – feels the need to search for validation outside of the public service framework, and seeks to find external policy rationales, it would suggest that the rise of official environmentalism plays a role which can only be understood in the context of the depth of the crisis of public institutions which lack a framework for legitimising their social role.

## Education

It appears that the education sector has become equally concerned with improving its green credentials and for similar reasons. Like the health service, education - being human-intensive - runs up a large carbon footprint. In England alone, the higher education sector emits 3.3 million tons of carbon dioxide annually, making cutting carbon a potentially key money-saving priority for all universities and higher education colleges.<sup>7</sup> More than half of UK universities have signed up to work closely with the Carbon Trust to reduce their carbon footprint and make energy savings.<sup>8</sup> Clearly the 'carbon agenda' provides a useful framework for universities to plan and manage their

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<sup>7</sup> 'University reduces its carbon footprint', Roehampton University, 1 June 2007.

<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/news/carbontrust.html>

<sup>8</sup> 'University to cut its carbon footprint', Lancaster University, June 2008.

<http://domino.lancs.ac.uk/info/lunews.nsf/I/CE9705012EE1F5CA80257459003F50FE>



resources with many universities taking elaborate steps to measure their carbon footprint.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from institutional frameworks for resource management and planning, many universities have placed an increased focus on their 'Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility Agenda' which, through the focus on the environment, 'aims to bring together the whole university community (students, academics and staff) to pursue their project ideas relating to sustainability (at the university and the community at large), and social and community concerns.'<sup>10</sup> These concerns are promoted through bringing together many aspects of university outreach and development work under the banner of sustainability, often involving community volunteering and careers units, the students union and many other related centres. As one university states, regarding its umbrella forum: 'The ethos of the project is to get involved together to make the university a more sustainable and socially responsible place. If you have any ideas and projects that you would like to

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<sup>9</sup> 'University carbon footprint calculated', City University London, 16 August 2007.

[http://www.city.ac.uk/news/archive/2007/08\\_august/16082007\\_4.html](http://www.city.ac.uk/news/archive/2007/08_august/16082007_4.html)

<sup>10</sup> 'Introducing the Tomorrow's Leaders Project', University of Westminster.

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/page-17818>

undertake (sustainability or social), the... project is the perfect forum to get things done and make your voice heard.’<sup>11</sup>

While, for most universities, the focus on global warming has provided a mechanism of relationship management with various internal bodies, external institutions and the student body, many have also taken the lead in organising events and activities, placing the university at the centre of campaigns around the environment, in ways which self consciously seek to bring students and staff together around the theme. For example, at the end of 2008, Nottingham Trent University launched its ‘Make CO2 History’ campaign with a programme of films, lectures and competitions. The framework for Nottingham Trent, along with many other universities, is one which encourages students to make suggestions and become involved and similarly urges staff to report any ‘instances of energy wastage’ spotted around campus.<sup>12</sup>

Most UK Universities have been anxious to highlight their actions in addressing climate change. Internal and external publicity has become so

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Introducing the Tomorrow’s Leaders Project’, University of Westminster.

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/page-17818>

<sup>12</sup> ‘University reduces carbon footprint’, Nottingham Trent University, 5 December 2008.

<http://www.thisisnottingham.co.uk/news/University-reduces-carbon-footprint/article-527645-detail/article.html>

closely linked to these events and actions that it is difficult to believe that they are purely motivated on the grounds of cost-savings. It is increasingly apparent that one attraction of the focus on global warming is external and internal validation. In fact, this focus on validation or institutional legitimacy appears to often take precedence over the technical steps necessary to reduce carbon emissions. For example, University press offices have been keen to promote the fact that Universities are taking part in events such as 'global Earth Hour', which took place on 28 March 2009, with the promise to 'switch off' during the hour - between 8.30pm and 9.30pm.<sup>13</sup> This is clearly an important policy commitment and was promoted at some institutions as a 'university wide initiative', often led by Estates & Facilities.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that while Universities often find it difficult to relate to students through their academic framework - where there are regularly concerns with the poor results from student satisfactions surveys - over the issue of global warming these connections become less problematic. In fact, though action on climate change, universities have been able to establish very close and cooperative relations with student unions and activist groups and student-led

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<sup>13</sup> See the list of Universities and Colleges which have signed up for 'Earth Hour' here:

[http://earthhour.wwf.org.uk/how\\_you\\_can\\_help/universities/university\\_news/](http://earthhour.wwf.org.uk/how_you_can_help/universities/university_news/)

<sup>14</sup> Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility Officer announcement to Westminster University staff emailing list, 21 March 2009.

projects focusing on sustainability and responsibility. With regard to 'Earth Hour', universities have sought to build a deeper connection with students not primarily as students but as individuals. This is highlighted in university material which suggests that the universities are not so much leading on this front as facilitating, with the promise that: 'You can support this important event by switching off at home and enjoying the moment in the candlelight.'<sup>15</sup>

The fact that this was more to do with representational identity than with any practical reduction in the carbon footprint was clarified by the response to Earth Day in some institutions, where students and staff were concerned that the attention to the needs of the environment might actually conflict with their primary relationship to the university – educational development. In response to concerns that if universities 'switched off' students and staff might not have access to email and internet connections, some universities were forced to clarify that 'only the lights will be switched off, so no activities will be disrupted'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility Officer announcement to Westminster University staff emailing list, 21 March 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility Officer announcement to Westminster University staff emailing list, 23 March 2009.

The potential clash between the needs of the University sector (or the NHS) to seek public recognition for its awareness and policy-sensitivity with regard to the environment and their traditional people-centred tasks of health and education, poses problems in working environments in which people need heating, light and technological facilities. In fact, awareness of the limits of seeking validation and connection through global or ethical frameworks of environmentalism at the same time as maintaining the traditional tasks and services of state sector institutions has meant that validation is increasingly being sought at the level of 'ethical branding' and 'identity' rather than solely at the level of concrete measurements of 'carbon footprints'.

For universities, it is their broader contribution to educating and constructing a supportive community around global warming that is increasingly central, as Westminster University notes: 'The most important thing about the Earth Hour is raising awareness and encouraging people to take part in it. WWF has set a target of 1 billion people to switch their lights off; a critical mass of this kind can truly make a difference.'<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the NHS, as considered above, is also articulating its role as one of advocacy, becoming a leading voice in the public sector, 'encouraging and challenging others, in a united front against climate change'.

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<sup>17</sup> Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility Officer announcement to Westminster University staff emailing list, 23 March 2009.

It seems that every state institution is increasingly making similar claims; that the institution concerned 'is very serious about its environmental mission'. These assertions of concern are often followed by statements which focus on the fact that, through their connection with the public, the institution is 'working to raise awareness'. The mission of raising awareness is central to university concerns with global warming. Here we have a very different kind of social purpose and meaning attached to 'raising awareness' than that traditionally taken up by the university sector. The university is 'raising awareness' through its relationship with students as individuals rather as students *per se*; this is a relationship entirely independent of the educational process and no different from the NHS's awareness raising claims, through its connection with the public and other bodies.

It appears that, through the emphasis on environmental concerns, these state institutions seek to transform their relationship to the public: while their leadership role in relationship to social health and educational advancement has become problematic, their new 'leadership' role is one which seeks to engage the public in becoming increasingly aware of the shared duties and responsibilities involved in their relationship to the environment. In the emphasis upon external concerns of environmental questions and global warming, where the public can be constituted as an abstract whole, these

institutions seek to demonstrate leadership and social collective purpose while, at the same time, increasingly distancing themselves from leadership responsibilities in their traditional educational and welfare roles, where social collectives seem to dissolve into individuated service consumers not open to collective identification.

## Conclusion

In the dominant framing of the institutional promotion of awareness of global warming it is generally asserted that the problems and concerns connected with global warming have reshaped public policy frameworks and that public demand for institutions to contribute to tackling this problem has forced state bureaucracies to act on this question. This article has sought to question this framing of why it appears that addressing the institutional 'carbon footprint' and raising collective awareness of environmental concerns appear to be so central to liberal state institutions today.

It has been suggested that this shift cannot be explained solely as a response to pressure from an ethically-engaged public; it has been state institutions themselves that have taken the initiative in relation to environmental concerns. It has further been suggested that the institutional desire to focus

upon this issue betrays a lack of institutional self-confidence, an awareness of the lack of positive connection to the public these institutions serve, and a concern of how these institutions can be justified or judged in our current times. These concerns indicate that growing 'awareness' about global warming may be emerging as a substitute for previous social connections between liberal state institutions and the public.

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