The Conservation Society: Harbinger of the 1970s Environment Movement in the UK

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ABSTRACT

The Conservation Society was the first environmental society in the UK. It was founded in 1966 in response to the then widely perceived global threat of over-population. It was an uneasy coalition between political radicals wanting wider public access to birth control and traditional conservationists, like Lady Eve Balfour of the Soil Association. By the early 1970s, under the Directorship of John Davoll, it moved away from population concerns to articulate an 'environmental' message based on an integrated view of population, resources and technology (strongly influenced by Paul Ehrlich). Despite its initial success it went into a slow decline from 1973. It was at heart a conservative and traditional organisation and it could not compete with the more dynamic and youthful Friends of the Earth. Its inability to adapt to a changing culture was its downfall, but its intellectual message was the foundation for 1970s environmentalism.

KEYWORDS

Conservation Society, John Davoll, Eve Balfour, over-population, 1960s.

INTRODUCTION

Until the mid1970s the Conservation Society (ConSoc) was the best known and the largest of the then new environmental groups in the UK. Despite its influence there has been very little written about it. This may be partly because there are so few of its publications in university libraries. Its newsletter, which had a circulation of over 8,000 in its heyday, is completely absent from the British Library periodical collection.[1] There exist only a few scattered reports (mainly on population issues) and a book reporting on their 1970 conference 'Decade of Decision'.[2]

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The only authors to investigate the history and role of ConSoc are Meredith Veldman in the late 1980s and Phil Macnaghten in the late 1990s. Both went to interview John Davoll, the Director of ConSoc from 1971–87, and obtained access to ConSoc literature. While Veldman devotes five pages to ConSoc, Macnaghten only makes two passing references to it.[3] Similarly Robert Lamb, in his history of Friends of the Earth (FoE) makes only three passing references to the society.[4]

Another reason for ConSoc's neglect is its (early) pre-occupation with population control, which ceased to be of concern to environmentalists in the mid-1970s after it became associated with right wing, coercive ideologies espoused by authors such as Garrett Hardin. Furthermore few members of ConSoc were young, fewer still were '60s radicals, and hardly any of the environmental writers and researchers in the 1970s and 1980s had been members. Thus to the 1970s activists ConSoc was ancient history, definitely unfashionable and largely irrelevant. In the language of the time 'conservation' was out, 'environment' was in.

Reason for study

The Society was formed to tackle the then widely perceived world problem of over-population. Population growth was considered a threat, not only in developing countries, but also in Britain. Such growth, it was believed, would result in poverty, over use of resources, pollution and damage to wildlife. It was at heart a Malthusian view, which the Society (and many other sections of society) willingly embraced.

However where the Society diverged from traditional Malthusian views was in the solutions. Rather than moral restraint it urged the provision of birth control, particularly the universal provision of contraception. In this it had the backing of the existing birth control movement, a long established radical and liberal cause. The campaign for birth control during the 1960s Labour Government resulted in two major bills, the Family Planning Bill (1967), and the Abortion Reform Bill (1967), both major causes for liberal and radical groups.

Associated with this campaign for birth control, was the implicit desire by some of its supporters for sexual freedom and liberation, often termed by its critics 'permissiveness'. This desire was made into a central theme of the 1960s 'youth' protest movement and the emerging 'alternative' society or counter-culture.

Thus many birth control campaigners and liberals joined the Society, because of its advocacy and support for birth control and abortion. In fact one disgruntled member complained it had been taken over by the Family Planning Association! However also joining were Conservatives and 'racialists' who wanted immigration controls (again another popular '60s issue) as a solution to over-population.

ConSoc was a marriage between sixties liberalism and traditional conservationism. This is symbolised by the participation as presidents of ConSoc of Lord Ritchie-Calder, Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson), Eric Lubbock (Lord Avebury) and Lady Eve Balfour, within a few years of one another. The first three were well-known journalists and authors, active in liberal causes whilst Lady Eva Balfour, was founder of the Soil Association and writer on organic farming, nutrition and traditional conservation matters.

Eve Balfour had been instrumental in the founding, in 1945, of the Soil Association, which according to Anna Bramwell was 'the first effective ecological pressure group in the United Kingdom' the importance of which was that it bought together 'the various groups and people worried about soil erosion, soil fertility, pollution and chemical-based agriculture'.[5] It was from this tradition that ConSoc put together a coherent critique of the then current orthodoxy. This critique challenged the direction of modern society, and called into question the validity and need for economic growth, technological advance and the pursuit of 'progress'.

ConSoc's achievement was to mount a largely intellectual challenge to this orthodoxy, communicate it to the Government and the public, and establish a large network of local branches, which often campaigned successfully on local environmental issues. These local branches, established before FoE had a large branch network, were the centres for early environmental activity.

Many of the famous activists in the 1970s, such as Walt Patterson, Michael Allaby, Malcolm Caldwell, Gerald Leach, and Kit Pedlar, spoke to local ConSoc meetings. As FoE established its branch network many ConSoc and FoE branches worked together on campaigns, and presumably often shared membership. Up until the early to mid 1970s ConSoc was the senior partner; after that it became the junior one as FoE became the more dynamic organisation.

Consoc was also able to recruit many well-known campaigners to its ruling Council. Prominent members included animal rights campaigner Ruth Harrison, birth-control activist Dora Russell, geographer I.G. Simmons, and author Gordon Rattray Taylor.

THE 1960S: SOMETHING NEW?

The founding of ConSoc in 1966 could be viewed as just the setting up of a new organisation by a new generation of 'conservation' activists. Since the founding in 1865 of the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society (described by John McCormick as 'the world's first private environmental group'), there have been founded at regular intervals groups to protect and preserve Britain's cultural and natural heritage from industrial development.[6] Such groups (with date of founding in brackets) include the National Trust (1895), the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (1912), the Council for

the Protection of Rural England [CPRE] (1926), the Ramblers Association (1935), and the Civic Trust (1957).

However, it can be argued that in the 1960s there was a distinct shift in public attitudes towards the 'environment' (and many other issues). John McCormick labels this new attitude as 'New Environmentalism', and he writes that it was 'more dynamic, more broad-based and won much wider public support' than earlier groups.[7] To him the New Environmentalism differed from previous groups in two major respects. Firstly its focus was broader: it addressed the entire human environment with the central issue that of human survival. Secondly it was more overtly activist and political, with the message that the environmental catastrophe could only be avoided by fundamental and radical changes in the values and institutions of industrial society.

Kimber and Richardson, writing in the early 1970s, defined the difference in attitudes as:

> What is new is, on the one hand, the global approach to the problem – both figuratively and literally – and, on the other hand, the popularisation of the issues by the mass media. The emergence of the concept of 'system' in so many spheres of intellectual activity has encouraged a global approach to many problems. In particular the attention attracted by ecology has emphasised that what hitherto been regarded as disparate causes ...were in fact interrelated. So many different organisations are campaigning for aspects of the environment with so few of them covering a broad front. Those that do, for example the Conservation Society or Friends of the Earth, are of recent origin.[8]

Many of the issues taken up by these new groups – protection of wildlife, conservation of resources, pollution and overpopulation – were of longstanding concern and had been tackled by earlier groups, but undoubtedly novel – reflecting the spirit of the 1960s – were the tactics and methods used. Less focus on discreet lobbying and more on direct action.

Environmental concern in the sixties

It would be a great mistake to think that there was little 'environment' awareness or concern in the 1960s. It was just that the concept (and name) of the 'environment' was not known. Some people then were concerned, often passionately, about land use planning and transport issues, especially in urban areas, pollution control, access to the countryside and its preservation, and wildlife/nature conservation.

In the 1960s there were continual protests and campaigns against some development or other (e.g. South Downs pylons, Manchester water supply, Cow Green reservoir, London's third airport, motorways etc.). These were well reported in the press and often critically debated in the House of Lords but overwhelmingly approved by the House of Commons. They were public issues,

but they did not attract support beyond locally affected interests (generally aristocratic and rural middle class). The support for 'modernisation' was too strong in urban areas. Harold Wilson's promise of the 'white heat of the technological revolution' captured the public imagination rather than complaints about the impacts of modernisation, which were portrayed as elitist, aristocratic and undesirable.

As Macnaghten and Urry comment on the 1960s:

> The UK Government approach to environmental issues can best be understood through the three durable discourses of amenity, aesthetics and science … government agencies still conceived of nature within the older vocabularies of rural preservation and amenity. This produced a tacit but prevailing consensus that concerns over nature were largely irrelevant to public policy development aimed at further modernisation of such areas as agriculture, energy supply, transport infrastructure and nuclear power stations, over and above their impact on landscape and amenity.[9]

But in the mid to late sixties there was a change. The press (mainly *The Observer*, *The Guardian* and *New Scientist*), through the efforts of a few interested journalists (like Anthony Tucker, John Hillaby, Nigel Calder, Gerald Leach, Jon Tinker, and Tony Aldous) began to present stories about effects of pollution. When these made dramatic TV pictures, as with the Torrey Canyon oil pollution disaster in 1967, public interest and concern increased. As more stories followed, popular paperbacks on 'eco-doom' (by Ehrlich, Hardin, Commoner et al.), concerned with over-population, resource shortages and world survival, arrived from the United States and were soon followed by British versions (by Georg Borgstrom, Hugh Montefiore, Gordon Rattray Taylor, Lord Ritchie-Calder et al.).

This increasing media attention and 'eco-doom' literature began to generate an awakening sense of a general crisis of environmental bads, moving across national borders and potentially invading everyone's territory. Eco-doom began to get personal – your survival and that of the world was at stake – and a new band of people calling themselves 'ecologists' claimed to have the answer.

The relationship between the media, environmental groups and the political and cultural climate in the 1960s is beyond the scope of this paper.[10] But the 1960s were undoubtedly a turbulent time when many long held orthodoxies were challenged. That the conventional wisdom on Nature, conservation and technology was challenged is no surprise.

However, ConSoc was not a radical group in the cultural or political sense: it operated as a very staid and traditional pressure group, abhorring demonstrations and public protest in favour of traditional lobbying. In fact it was its very conservatism in structure, action and style that turned young people away from it to FoE. ConSoc was definitely not part of the radical sixties, yet its intellectual programme informed and shaped those groups that were to follow it.

Its main achievement was to 'modernise' the traditional conservation message, and make it more acceptable to city dwellers. It moved the message away from traditional concerns with over-population, wildlife and countryside issues, to more radical and counter-cultural concerns with technology, pollution, lifestyle and economic growth. Instead of aristocratic concerns about stewardship of the countryside it offered a more democratic vision based on personal responsibility and lifestyle.

THE BEGINNING

The origin of ConSoc, according to its founder Dr Douglas MacEwan, is a strange mixture of sixties liberalism, epitomised by *Playboy* magazine, *The Observer* and *New Scientist*, together with Malthusian concerns about over-population and the feckless poor.

Douglas MacEwan

MacEwan, in his recollections over 20 years later, says that:

> The idea of the society arose in my mind while I was doing research work in Spain, and what triggered it off was an article by Sir Julian Huxley, in – I have to admit it – Playboy.[11]

In that article Sir Julian wrote not only of the dangers of over-population but of excessive mobility, such as the mass tourism that was threatening ancient monuments like Stonehenge, the cave paintings at Lascaux, and the city of Venice.[12]

MacEwan agreed with Huxley, calling it

> a fairly far-sighted summary of the evils of unfettered growth. I was moved to write to Sir Julian suggesting forming a society. He replied somewhat sceptically but not too much so. Later, when Edith Freeman put a letter along similar lines in *The Observer*, we got together, and decided on action. A letter was concocted for *The Telegraph* and *The Observer* and the result was impressive: no fewer than 400 replies.

MacEwan was already thinking about a new kind of society, as he had already responded to Nigel Calder's article in *New Scientist* on 8 Oct 1964 (at the time of the 1964 general election). Calder's article expressed dissatisfaction with the similar policies offered by the two main parties, and called for the creation of two very different political parties, X and Y.[13] This seminal article basically espoused two different visions of the future: 'Party X' technocratic, 'Party Y' 'ecological'. What is interesting about Calder's vision is how much of the vision for 'Party Y' was to become part of the early 1970s environmental message.

In response to Calder's article MacEwan wrote to *New Scientist*, on 15 October 1964, saying that he wanted more differentiation between countries so '… people will be able to choose the community to which they feel attracted'. Furthermore 'there must be experimentations in ways of living' and imposition of a uniform culture on the world would 'bring with it the risk of a disastrous collapse, due to accumulated neuroses and frustrations'.

Edith Freeman

A few days after Calder's article, Edith Freeman wrote to *The Observer* on the futility of the current political debate:

> The most serious problem facing the world is no longer nuclear war, it is the population explosion, What value is existence without opportunities of civilised life … ours is one of the most congested countries in the world and our population increase has reached alarming levels …[14]

She wrote of how productivity can be purchased at too high a price and asked '…how many voters would prefer to be a little poorer in monetary terms and to be able to cross the road without fear…?' She then gave the examples of heavy goods traffic, and noise from vehicles and aircraft. Whether she was influenced by Calder's article is unknown but her view corresponds closely with the position of Calder's 'Party Y'.

According to John Davoll's recollections:

> … the concept of the Society actually originated at the end of 1964 when, in response to a letter in *The Observer* from Edith Freeman, [MacEwan] wrote to her suggesting that a new type of organisation was needed for people dissatisfied with the main political parties' goal of ever more technological and industrial expansion. This idea was reinforced by an article of Nigel Calder's in 1964 envisaging a new 'Party Y' (as opposed to the conventional Party 'X') for those who were sceptical about the accepted wisdom.[15]

Davoll then states that MacEwan 'then published letters in the press outlining his proposals and inviting those interested to contact him'. This letter did not appear until 15 months later – the reason for this delay is not known [perhaps it was due to MacEwan being in Spain]. In the meantime the issue of over-population was attracting media and political interest.

The Observer *debate on population*

In early 1966, *The Observer* ran a debate entitled 'Too Many People' on the need for population and birth control. There were numerous letters in response. Some writers like Mrs Houghton, on 3 March, said there was a need for family planning for large 'problem' families. Michael Watts, in his letter of 13 March 1966,

broadened the issue to write of 'an alarming increase in Britain's population'. He saw problems due to 'increasing population pressure on our resources'. He quoted the Duke of Edinburgh as describing these problems as 'rather dismal'. He then suggested the curtailment of family allowances, more family planning, and seeking the views of Parliamentary candidates in the forthcoming General election. There were two more letters on these issues on 20 March.

The launch

Then in his letter of 27 March 1966, Douglas MacEwan launched the Society, writing:

> … a new society is in the process of formation which is concerned with fighting against the menaces of decreasing standards of life due to population pressure.
>
> This problem is world wide, and makes itself felt in subtle ways in the threat to wild life, interference with existing areas of unspoilt coastline, the spoiling of historic cities, pressure to apply chemical methods of food production...
>
> Our society will give full support to Operation Neptune and the numerous conservation societies which are desperately trying to stem the tide of encroachment … But we believe that lying behind all the piecemeal efforts is a uniform philosophy, that of maintaining a correct balance between man and nature. We believe efforts must be co-ordinated, and that political pressure must be applied to make our governors realise that these problems take precedence over all political problems.
>
> The Society already has promises of support from numerous scientists and others. I ask that all who might agree with its aims to get in touch with me.

A similar letter appeared in *The Telegraph*. Altogether about 400 people replied.

Inaugural meetings and aims

The inaugural meeting of the Society was held on 22 July 1966 at the Linnean Society rooms, London, when a committee of 22 was set up.[16] Douglas MacEwan, became Secretary and drafted the first 'Programme and Statement of Aims'. His general principles were:

1. A shift of emphasis is necessary from quantity of population to quality of life.
2. Population control forms an integral part of all planning for human betterment.
3. Our civilisation will not be permanent unless it learns to meet its year-to-year expenses in raw materials, instead of recklessly using up accumulated capital. Investment and population policy should be dictated by this necessity.
4. It is also essential to conserve enjoyment and fulfilment resources.[17]

The Society was then launched publicly on 26 November 1966, with an Inaugural General Meeting, at the Royal Society of Arts, London. There was an inspired choice of Lady Eve Balfour to give the Address. She, as founder of the Soil Association, was well known to traditional conservationists but her views on organic farming were anathema to the scientific community.[18] MacEwan, as an agricultural research scientist, had qualms. He said:

> I have to confess that the decision to invite Lady Eve caused me some private heart-searching, because I had been brought up in the orthodox Scottish and English Soil Science tradition in which mention of Lady Eve was like summoning the Devil in a medieval monastery. My chief at the Macaulay Institute in Scotland … instilled in me a contempt for the Soil Association and its tenets.[19]

Nevertheless the meeting was a success and the Society was launched, and rapidly grew in membership. It developed a tradition of a series of annual Presidential Addresses by well known public figures, culminating in the address by Paul Ehrlich in Jan 1972, which marked the high point of the Society's existence.[20]

CONSOC'S VISION

What distinguished ConSoc from other existing bodies was its insistence that, in the words of MacEwan,

> the problems of conservation, preservation and quality of life are interlinked, and that no single one of them can be solved in isolation … All these things are dependent on a national population policy.

It was his hope that

> we would be able to found a society which would link together these separate interests, in order to press for one concerted national policy for the conservation and extension of amenity.[21]

This call for unification of all groups was echoed by Lady Eve Balfour in her speech:

> The Conservation Society can be the common ground where all the groups working for one or other of (these aims) can meet and co-operate, so that a co-ordinated and truly ecological plan of campaign can be formulated which will have the whole-hearted co-operation of them all.

However, this did not happen. As Davoll commented in 1972,

> Relations between the ConSoc and the existing amenity and preservation societies got off to a bad start in 1966, when an unfortunate phrase in our statement of

> aims about 'co-ordinating the work of other societies' caused a general raising of hackles …

These offending words were soon deleted, and with it any idea of a co-ordinating role.

Intellectual growth

Over the next five years, 1966–71, the Society aimed, according to Davoll in his 1971 Review of Society's activities: '… *to produce a full understanding of the nature of the world environmental crisis in government and public alike'*, and to bring about a full realisation '… *that a totally new view of man's place on earth must shape our future*' [emphasis in original].

These were the years of intellectual growth for the environment movement, and as Davoll commented there was

> a broadening of concern from single issues to the ecology of the whole planet, and from population growth alone to a more comprehensive (and more complex) picture that also included the growth of industrial and agricultural activity.[22]

ConSoc's first published papers, in 1968, were on population and conservation, entitled ' Britain's Population Problem' and 'A Policy for Conservation'. These were further expanded in 1970 to 'Why Britain Needs a Population Policy' and 'Why Britain Needs a Conservation Policy for the Environment'.

At the end of 1969, an internal paper on 'Technology, Pollution and Conservation' developed the view that 'the impact of man on the environment is, in general terms, proportional to the product of human numbers and the average level of industrial and related activity'. This relationship, promoted by Paul Ehrlich, soon became Society policy and became part of the Society's 'Philosophy, Aims and Proposed Action', published in 1971.

John Davoll, in his 1976 ConSoc Annual Report, wrote an article entitled 'The Environmental debate 1966–76'. He describes the period from the mid-'60s to the Stockholm Conference:

> In the environment movement this was a period of vigorous (and sometimes acrimonious) debate on whether we should be more worried by population growth or by the expansion of industrial economies …
>
> by 1972 a substantial consensus was emerging that total environmental impact depended, very roughly, on the number of people multiplied by the average material demand exercised by each person …
>
> division of world into rich and poor, exacerbated every problem of adjustment to a finite world. Increasingly the broad aim of environmentalists became defined as a sustainable world or steady state economy, in diametric opposition to the idea of indefinite exponential growth …

> The effect of the ecological movement (ecology was a key word of the early 1970s) on society at large was complex. The image of 'Spaceship Earth' was a powerful one … [extending] to millions a perception previously confined to a few imaginative writers … the concept of the earth as a finite system, the penetration of the basic idea into the intellectual world was remarkably rapid, and by any standards constitutes an outstanding achievement.

Government acceptance

ConSoc strove to be taken seriously by the Government, and wished to be part of Government decision making. Its opportunity came with Government planning for the 1972 UN Conference in Stockholm. In 1970 the Department of the Environment (DoE) was set up, and Peter Walker, its first Secretary of State, called for submissions from interested parties about what the Government's contribution to the Stockholm Conference should be. He also set up four Working Parties.

The Society in response, submitted a memorandum to DoE in April 1971 and two more detailed papers to the Working Parties on Pollution of the Environment, and Resources in June 1971. This led to ConSoc being represented on the Pollution Working Party whose published report, *Pollution: Nuisance or Nemesis?* (1972), included a full statement of the Society's general approach.

These three submissions were the culmination of efforts by the Society to have its message acknowledged by the public and Government. These same three papers were sent to Paul Ehrlich who then agreed to become the Society's President for 1972. They were also used in the preparation of the *Blueprint for Survival*, co-authored by Sam Lawrence, ConSoc Secretary, and John Davoll, Director.

THE HIGH POINT

During the years 1970 to 1972 there was heavy media coverage of the 'environmental crisis', which culminated in extensive reporting of the Stockholm Conference in 1972. According to Davoll this led to 'a rapid increase in the society's membership, as we were the only body with the comprehensive approach that seemed to be called for'.[23] However, he reminisces that media interest in 'eco-doom' often consisted of 'a flurry of interest by colour supplements', with interest quickly fading away with the attitude that they had 'done doomsday'.[24]

This media interest in 'Doomsday prophecies' led to a doubling in ConSoc membership with over 4,600 new members joining in 1971–2, but half of them did not renew. Interest in the Society reached its climax in January 1972, with

the Presidential Address by Paul Ehrlich at Central Hall, Westminster. There was a capacity audience of 2,600 with several hundred more turned away at the door, and extensive press coverage in euphoric tones.

Membership, which was 2,800 in 1970, doubled to 5,700 by November 1971 and rose to 8,320 in September 1972 before reaching a peak of 8,700 in November 1973. It then slowly and steadily declined to 4,200 in 1986.

REASONS FOR DECLINE

Davoll's Reasons

John Davoll in his 1990 paper, a post-mortem on the Society, attempts to explain why the Society's decline set in immediately after 'the most successful year in its history in terms of growth in membership and influence'.

He says the causes of this decline were not internal but external. These include collapse of the Society's credibility on its central issue, UK over-population, and criticism of its support for 'Doomsday' literature. There was a fall in the UK birth rate from 1968 on, and this led to a collapse of the high population projections (74 million by 2000) that the Society had initially warned against. Davoll writes:

> UK population growth had been a very convenient subject for campaigning; it dealt in numbers which were easily comprehended, and it was not difficult to suggest remedies which would have relatively few adverse political or economic repercussions.[25]

The Society had also grown rapidly on the back of media interest in the global environmental debate of the early 1970s, with its many 'doomsday' stories and widely hyped reports such as *The Limits to Growth* and *A Blueprint for Survival*. Critical studies of these reports, Davoll says,

> weakened some of their arguments ('the conventional wisdom strikes back'), and a simultaneous loss of media interest ('Doomsday? That was yesterday's story') made recruitment of new members more difficult.

A third factor, says Davoll (and mentioned by other contemporary activists) was the onset of economic problems following the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973. Davoll comments, 'global environmental anxieties were pushed into the background by more mundane concerns about recession and inflation'.

As Davoll remarks, this sudden change in the climate of opinion showed very clearly in the Society's membership statistics.

> In 1972 the number of new members joining (about 4,600) was a record, but at the end of the year the number failing to renew their membership was also the highest we had experienced.

However these causes, cited by Davoll, were not a handicap to a new environmental organisation, Friends of the Earth, founded in Britain in late 1970. By mid 1971 it has won extensive publicity for its innovative eco-campaign, on returnable bottles. As Watt Patterson remarked, 'FoE's Schweppes "demo" gave the word a novel slant: instead of a bitter, even ugly confrontation, it was witty and engaging'.[26] The result was extensive media publicity and with it, a growing membership and influence that was to make it the leading environmental group in Britain by the mid 1970s. However in terms of numbers it remained smaller than ConSoc until the late 1970s: having only1,000 members (termed 'supporters') by end of1971, just 5,000 in 1976 and 16,000 by 1979.[27]

ConSoc was not able to adapt its ideology or its organisation to the dynamic methods of FoE. Instead it retreated to the setting up of working parties to study and campaign in various sectors where it felt changes were needed, such as transport, energy, agriculture and land use planning. As Davoll comments:

> As the Society's position worsened, and other societies (such as Friends of the Earth) were conducting high profile single-issue campaigns (returnable bottles; saving the whale) suggestions were made that the Society should look for something similar to stimulate flagging recruitment.
>
> Of course, these responses to difficulty conflicted with the proclaimed raison d'être of the Society, which was to identify and oppose the underlying causes of environmental damage. From a practical point of view they made it hard to explain to potential members exactly what the Society was for … Our image became increasingly blurred, and even a fair number of our members were probably confused.[28]

A different view

The roots of this terminal decline in ConSoc, I maintain, stretched back many years, and was not primarily caused, as Davoll maintains, by events in 1972–73. While ConSoc declined, FoE (and other groups) prospered. Why?

The reasons for its decline are, I shall argue:

1. Its membership profile was too elderly and, in the idiom of the '60s, 'square'.
2. Discontent over the lack of action, particularly from younger members.
3. Rise of rival organisations, such as FoE and British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, and of 'alternative' groups.
4. The Society's inability to change its methods or ideology.
5. Over-reliance on its Director, John Davoll, who dominated the Society's policy.

The first three reasons are explored in detail below, using evidence from the

Society's newsletter. The last two reasons are my personal judgement, based on the totality of evidence on the Society, and are inter-related.

Membership profile

In 1967 the Society issued a questionnaire to its members about contraception and population policies, and their political and religious beliefs. Preliminary results were presented in the 1967 August 1967 Newsletter (No. 7) and full results in the February 1968 Newsletter (Vol. 2, No. 2). In the analysis of 294 replies on population policies, 18% described themselves as Conservative, 15% Liberal, 16% labour, 5% Communist and Left, and 50% were uncommitted.

Thus the Society can be described as mildly left but with some active Conservatives or, in Davoll's words, mostly middle class people with 'some sort of social conscience'. There are no details on age structure: perhaps it was too embarrassing to publish. Davoll says the average age of the founding group was in the fifties, with most members in their forties and fifties, with some pensioners and teenagers, but there was a big gap of people in their twenties and thirties.[29]

From the beginning the Society was aware of its lack of appeal to young people, and of the need to find issues to attract them. Also it was highly conscious of its (elitist) image and that of conservation in general. Helen Ware, in a letter to May 1968 Newsletter (Vol. 2, No. 5) wrote that ConSoc should be against chemical warfare (this was at a time of the anti-Vietnam War demos and when the use of chemical defoliants was much in the news). She said this would gain support from young people, commenting that the Society seemed to be mainly made up of elderly people with a high percentage of reactionaries 'who are trying to live in the past' and that the Society had an 'upper class' image.

Media criticism

While some members wished to appeal more to young people, most were more concerned about the Society's image in the media. They wished to dissociate themselves from other conservation groups, and from the aristocratic image of conservation in general, which at that time was being championed by the likes of Prince Philip.

Charles Jeffrey, the editor of the Newsletter, referring to a critical article by Hillaby in the *New Scientist* said,

> … our Society is hoist with its own petard, being lumped with the rest of the conservation movement and criticised as ineffective, narrow in outlook, and unclear as to the problems involved and the aims required …[30]

A persistent critic was David Eversley, a geographer at Sussex University. In July 1967 he had attacked the Conservation Society in his BBC radio broadcast on population (reprinted in the *Listener*). At the 1969 British Associa-

tion for the Advancement of Science conference, he spoke against the 'new Malthusian alliance' and 'recurrent population hysteria'.

This view of conservationists, as elitists and protectionist, was common amongst the Left, and was later to find famous expression in Anthony Crosland's classic warning against conservationists 'pulling up the ladder behind them', at a CoEnCo conference in September 1970.[31] However Crosland's attack was against those who were anti-growth (in population and consumption); he was in fact supportive of a clean and healthy environment for all.[32]

Discontent of members

By mid-1970 environmental issues were receiving much media attention, but there was discontent among some members of ConSoc at its lack of action, poor performance and small size. Generally this criticism came from the London and the Cambridge University branches, who had attracted many young people, often with previous experience of radical political methods. They wanted a more militant and direct action approach.

By 1971, the word 'conservation' was out. Ecology was in, gradually to be replaced by the word 'environment'. Young people looked to US groups like Ecology Action in Berkeley, while in 1971 Michael Allaby wrote a book on young activists called 'The Eco-Activists'. New magazines were springing in Britain up with names like *The Ecologist*, or *Your Environment*. The Conservation Society faced an image problem, particularly among young people.

ConSoc was perhaps overwhelmed by the social and cultural changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It could not relate its conservation message to anti-Vietnam war protesters, student demonstrators or 'hippie' communes. It sensed something significant was happening amongst young people, a change in their fundamental values, but the Society was unsure how it could and should relate to these changes.

Eco-activists

ConSoc, as the first 'environmental' group, was able to give a platform to many younger activists who were to play an important role in FoE and the alternative technology magazine *Undercurrents*. Ian Breach, who was its unpaid Press and Public Relations Officer for 1970–72, left to pursue a freelance career, often writing for *The Guardian* and *New Scientist* on nuclear energy matters.

One of the first names mentioned was Malcolm Caldwell, a lecturer at London University, who was to achieve notoriety in late 1970s for his support of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. He spoke at the ConSoc conference, *Decade of Decision* and put forward a radical, even Maoist view, that capitalism and its mania for growth led to over-population, over-consumption and environmental destruction.[33]

London was the intellectual centre for these activists, and the London Branch of ConSoc, with 500 members, was the most active. It organised a lecture series in 1970–71. Speakers included *The Observer* environment writer Gerald Leach (October 1970); TV personality Kit Pedlar from the *Doomwatch* programme (March 1971); George Hay (May 1971); and *Your Environment* editor Walt Patterson (July 1971). Leach, Pedlar and Patterson were all to write for *Undercurrents* on energy issues, while Patterson was to become the leading anti-nuclear campaigner for FoE.

Also active was the Cambridge University Branch, with its membership of 110. On 7 February 1970, Walt Patterson spoke to a small group of student members on recent developments in the conservation movement and discussed ideas on what action might be taken in the future.[34] In late 1972 he was to become a full time activist for FoE, and apply the experience gained from his ConSoc meetings with students to great effect in building an anti-nuclear-power movement.

On 25 February 1970, Michael Allaby, then editor of the Soil Association newsletter *Span* and sub-editor of *The Ecologist*, spoke at Cambridge on 'Population and the Green Revolution'.[35] Interestingly Allaby in his book, *The Eco-activists*, devotes eight pages to the Cambridge University ecology groups,[36] in particular its Ecological Society (CUES) later called EcoAction, and makes only passing reference to the existence of the Conservation Society, both at Cambridge and nationally.

The Cambridge branch also reported some uncharacteristic ConSoc behaviour, a demonstration and peaceful picketing against Peter Walker, Minster for the Environment. It reported that it got good publicity, both in the *Cambridge Evening News* and on Anglia TV.

This sort of action was a forerunner of those produced by FoE that were to win it such media attention and much activist support. As FoE prospered through direct action and media publicity, ConSoc shrunk as its few young activists slipped away to join more dynamic and youthful groups.

Excess stability: Davoll as Director

John Davoll joined the Society at its inception in 1966, became Chairman in 1968, and the first (and only) Director in 1971, until its close in 1987. The Society only had two or three paid staff, and Davoll was clearly in a position to be the dominant voice of the Society. As he said in 1990:

> As Chairman and then Director, I developed a more general framework for policy to take account of population growth and industrial expansion in the developed and undeveloped parts of the world, and also to consider the political, social and economic implications of the policies we were advocating.

These policies found acceptance and publicity in the early 1970s, but, as mentioned above, fell from favour in the mid 1970s. Davoll admits he found himself in a dilemma:

> I was convinced that no lasting solution to the major environmental problems could be achieved without profound social and economic changes, and yet I was at a loss in trying to suggest action towards this goal that might have visible results.[37]

This intellectual and policy paralysis (shared by many in the Society) was to be its downfall. Perhaps a change of Director might have led to a change in policy. However the Society had, as a democratic society, voted on and adopted certain fundamental policies and structures, which it would have been very hard to get the governing committees and membership to change. Also the Society was not in a financial position to offer an attractive salary to another Director.

Furthermore Davoll's preference for policy formulation rather than campaigning set the tone for the Society. As he admits:

> … my interests lay more in the identification and analysis of general problems than in campaigning against local and specific assaults on the environment …[38]

Davoll eschewed, even abhorred, demonstrations and public protest, and was thus completely out of sympathy with the likes of FoE and other eco protesters, even from his own Society. His home was the conference platform and committee room, not the street demo or picket line. His life was one of scientific and rational thought, of controlled and well-ordered debate and procedures, all rooted in an ethical, democratic and liberal approach. This approach permeated the Society, and thus it was at a loss to understand or to deal with the rise of the 1970s eco-activists shouting slogans, putting forward quasi-mystical beliefs, and belonging to anarchic groups.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps Davoll is right when he quotes approvingly John Maddox's comments on the rise and fall of societies seeking to change public and government perceptions:

> Societies established to promote an awareness among scientists and the general public of the social consequences of science and technology tend to have a short half-life … In Britain at least, national societies have either changed their character or withered as members lose enthusiasm when they realise the difficulties of producing tangible results.[39]

Davoll comments that the effects on ConSoc of an increasing realisation of the difficulties of its task were consistent with Maddox's observations, and

> one can also find confirmation of his suggestion that societies react to adversity by modifying or abandoning their initial aims if this seems to be the price of survival.[40]

However the tragedy, or perhaps the integrity, of ConSoc lay in its inability to modify or abandon its initial aims. The central message of its founder Douglas McEwan was that 'conservation is meaningless without population limitation'.[41] The Society, and in particular John Davoll, could not abandon their central belief that the commitment to perpetual growth in population and in material production was the root cause of all environmental problems. To them there were limits to growth and what was needed was a blueprint for survival. These were basic concepts that could not be abandoned, or even modified with talk of 'sustainable growth'.

ConSoc's legacy

ConSoc may be ignored by most environmental writers, who instead concentrate on histories of Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the Green Party or the International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN).[42] However, in the early 1970s, its definition of the 'environmental' problem was absorbed uncritically by FoE, who were more concerned with action than with theory. As Tom Burke, FoE Director in the 1970s, remarks in an interview about his early days in the London FoE office in 1972:

> Friends of the Earth was militant compared to groups like CPRE, in the conservation tradition, though the Conservation Society had just done quite an aggressive protest about landfill sites.
>
> But Environment was driven out of a population, resources, pollution tradition. It was about the future as distinct from the past. I think if anything the real mobilising force was anti-authoritarian feeling … It was an age of protest, protest was a legitimate thing. Theory came later.[43]

ConSoc's championing of the ideology of 'limits to growth' and return to small scale communities set the agenda for future environmental groups – an agenda which despite extensive criticism[44] and internal debate[45] is still with us 30 years later.

As Meredith Veldman concludes in her pioneering study of British 'green' groups:

> … the Conservation Society helped set the agenda of eco-activists' concerns, demonstrated that the challenge to growth stood at the centre of the Green critique, and offered an alternative vision of what Britain should become.[46]

NOTES

[1] In June 1999 a complete collection of the Conservation Society Newsletter and Annual Reports was donated to the Cambridge University Library. Other material, from the collection amassed by John Davoll, was donated to the Sheffield Archives and placed in the Leonard Taitz archive (ref 1993/108).
[2] Hettena and Syer 1971.
[3] Veldman 1994, 217–22; Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 50, 52.
[4] Lamb 1996, 52, 80, 83.
[5] Bramwell 1989, 216.
[6] McCormick 1995, 6–7.
[7] McCormick 1995, 56.
[8] Kimber and Richardson 1974, 3.
[9] Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 50.
[10] See works by Anderson (1997) and Hansen (1993) on media and environment, Gitlin (1987) and Marwick (1998) on 1960s cultural climate.
[11] MacEwan 1987.
[12] Huxley 1965.
[13] Calder 1964.
[14] *The Observer* 11 October 1964.
[15] Davoll 1987.
[16] See Minutes for membership.
[17] Davoll 1987.
[18] See Payne 1971.
[19] MacEwan 1987.
[20] Davoll, interview with the author, 1999.
[21] MacEwan 1987.
[22] Davoll 1987.
[23] Davoll 1987.
[24] Davoll, interview with the author, 1999.
[25] Davoll 1990.
[26] Patterson 1984.
[27] Lamb 1996.
[28] Davoll 1990.
[29] Davoll, interview with the author, 1999.
[30] ConSoc Newsletter, March 1969 (Vol. 3, No. 3); *New Scientist* 2 January 1969.
[31] Allaby 1971, p 151.
[32] Crosland 1968.
[33] Hettena and Syer 1971.
[34] Branch report in the Newsletter, May/June1971 (Vol. 5, No. 2).
[35] Ibid.
[36] Allaby 1971 pp. 132–39.
[37] Davoll 1990.
[38] Ibid.
[39] *Nature* ,29 March 1969.
[40] Davoll 1990.
[41] MacEwan 1971.

[42] See, for Friends of the Earth, Lamb 1996; for Greenpeace, Hunter 1980; for the Green Party, Wall 1994; and for the IUCN, Holdgate 1999.
[43] Lamb 1996, 80.
[44] Beckerman 1974; Allaby 1995, Harper 2000.
[45] Barry 1999; Humphrey 2001.
[46] Veldman 1994.

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