

ADDRESS BY MR TOM BURKE CBE

**TO THE GREEN ALLIANCE 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY**

IMAX THEATRE, SCIENCE MUSEUM, LONDON  
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Thank you for that very kind introduction. It is a great pleasure to be among so many good friends tonight. Over the past twenty-five years we have all shared hopes and fears, laughter and tears, victories and defeats in the great cause that is our environment.

And through it all, the Green Alliance has been a growing force. We are here tonight to celebrate that growth, to renew and reinforce it and to look ahead to future challenges.

I am honoured to have been asked to introduce this evening. And, I must admit, a little intimidated. Guy Thompson does not do easy. 'Just sum up the past twenty-five years and say what's next – oh, and don't take more than twenty minutes'. I will do my best.

But first I want to pay tribute to all of those whose hard work has brought us to this point. Many of them are here this evening. They are far too numerous to mention individually. Without them there would be nothing to celebrate and no future to plan.

But I could not let this moment pass without a thought for Maurice Ash whose gentle guidance and deep pockets in those always difficult early days got us off to such a good start - securing the independence of thought and action that has been such a hallmark of the Green Alliance.

The Green Alliance's is a story whose end is yet to be written. But, it began, as good stories always do, with a very simple idea. The environment needs to be at the heart of politics.

The informing vision of the Green Alliance was that environmentalists needed as good a grip on the politics as we had on the arguments. And that is what we set out to do with, it must be admitted, rather more enthusiasm than experience.

It was a good thing that we did. Just as the Green Alliance bridges the twentieth and twenty-first Centuries, so it bridges the transition from the easy politics of the environment to the hard politics.

The easy politics of the environment have a familiar agenda – air and water pollution, hazardous wastes; toxic chemicals, radioactive substances. These were issues with easily identified victims and villains. There was a clear case for action. And, when

action was taken, there were more winners than losers - a particularly important factor for politicians. Many win-win solutions were available and the policy tools were at hand to deal with the problems.

That agenda has not gone away. And addressing it may not have seemed easy at the time. But compared to the agenda now coming to dominate the environmental debate, it really was easy.

The emergent agenda – deforestation, ocean degradation, water scarcity, food insecurity, biodiversity loss and, perhaps above all, climate change – introduce a very different, and more difficult, political challenge.

The case for action is not always clearly perceived. And if action is taken, there are more immediate losers than winners – a real switch off for politicians. It is far more difficult to find win-win solutions, the policy tools are far less obvious and, just to confuse matters more, the victims and villains are often simply ourselves oscillating haphazardly between our needs as citizens and our desires as consumers.

Meeting this agenda is the core challenge of sustainable development. This is now a much misused term – not the least by DEFRA – as so many people have bent its meaning to catch whatever fashionable wind was blowing.

The Brundtland definition remains as good today as when it was first drafted. What it means is that we have to deliver better economic opportunities to eight billion or more people without collapsing the ecological foundations of the economy. That is precisely those systems - the oceans, forests, freshwaters and climate - that it will take success at the hard politics of the environment to protect.

We forget too easily that these systems provide everything in our economy that is not provided by fossil fuels and non-fossil minerals. Sustainable development is not about balancing anything. It does not mean striking some lowest common denominator equilibrium between environmental, social and economic factors. It is about maintaining the basic environmental conditions without which economic development cannot take place

at all. Indeed, in the case of the climate, it is about maintaining the fundamental environmental conditions for civilisation itself.

In the nineteenth Century we learned the hard way that you must maintain the social conditions for economic growth or your economy will not grow. It took until the middle of the twentieth Century for everyone to accept the need to invest some of the proceeds of economic growth in maintaining those social conditions – health, education, welfare.

But by then we had spent five decades deciding whether communism or fascism was our preferred form of totalitarianism. It took another four decades before both options in that grim choice were finally gone.

If we fail to maintain the environmental conditions for development, if we do not invest much more of the proceeds of that development in their maintenance, if, in other words, we do not make the transition to sustainable development, we will repeat that sad lesson in this century. And the consequences of that failure will be even more catastrophic for humanity.

These are daunting prospects. Each of us has our own way of making them personally meaningful. For me it is this thought. I was born into a world of two and a half billion people. I live today in a world of six and a half billion. With luck I may well be alive on the day the eight billionth person is born.

When I was born there were six million elephants on the planet. Today there are about six hundred thousand. I may also live to see the last truly wild elephant die.

Now, I do not expect the Green Alliance to prevent this all on its own. But it will play a part. And, because of its expertise and focus on politics, an increasingly important part.

Influence is the art of using the power of others. The Green Alliance has earned its reputation as one of the more influential pressure groups in Britain. The trick to leveraging the work of larger organisations is the ability to build coalitions – to build bridges across issue or institutional boundaries.

This has been the Green Alliance's core competence. It means success by stealth and letting others take the credit wherever possible. It means thinking well ahead of the issue curve. It means understanding and aligning the interests of others. It means matching patience to passion. And, it means never, ever, mistaking the headlines for the outcomes.

We can be proud of those outcomes over the past twenty-five years. We began the dialogue between business and the environment in Britain. We launched the first discussions of green finance.

We set agendas. Julie Hill opened the debate on GM foods here in 1987 with a lecture by Jeremy Rifkin. It's hard to believe now, but we had great difficulty in getting someone from Greenpeace to attend. More recently, we launched a ground breaking initiative to explore what children really think about their environment and opened the debate on environmental justice. In today's terminology, we have been an incubator for new organisations. Sustain, Wastewatch and the Pesticides Trust all arose from Green Alliance initiatives.

We helped the government discover the need for Britain's first ever White Paper on the environment – a need the present government should urgently re-discover. Knowing that politicians really only listen to other politicians we wrote speeches and held seminars for all the political parties.

Indeed, just last week, I had the pleasure of attending a seminar that Guy Thompson chaired where the Secretary of State spent two hours discussing the environment community's expectations of a Labour government post-election. I have no doubt that I will soon be receiving my invitations to similar events with the other parties.

There are far too many other successes to mention tonight – from arranging the dinner at which the Prince of Wales first met the environmentalists from his own generation to providing a constant stream of special advisors to Ministers. But no-one could doubt that the Green Alliance is fulfilling its mission of projecting the environment into the heart of politics.

Environmentalism is an opera not a song. There are many parts to be played and a lot of songs to be written and sung. The music

must never become monotonous – a fault I fear found to frequently in our community. And there must be a strong story.

The Green Alliance's story is part of an older and wider tale. It begins with the nineteenth Century naturalists who laid the foundations of the modern conservation organisations. The first generation of environmentalists.

William Morris was an early leader, founding the Commons and Open Spaces Society. Its narrative runs through many tributaries – the RSPB, The World Wildlife Fund, the Wildlife Trusts, the Royal Society for Nature Conservation, Plantlife and a host of other bodies – to form that broad river we see today.

They were joined in the nineteen seventies by a second generation of younger, more impatient, environmentalists. If the first generation had as their impelling force the preservation of nature for its intrinsic or aesthetic value, this second generation had a more utilitarian, and more urgent, focus.

These are the campaigners, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Transport 2000 and an army of other local and national bodies. They are driven by the goals of securing a healthy environment for people and preserving the natural resource base of the economy.

Like any good story, this one has its proud record of battles fought and won. But I do not think that any one of us here this evening really thinks that we are winning the war.

The first two generations of environmentalists have been a guerrilla army. Outsiders, striking hard at the exposed weaknesses in the stubborn walls of economic orthodoxy that so dominate public policy debate. Their most enduring success has been to build a broad consciousness of the harm human beings are doing to their planet and thus to themselves.

This success manifests itself increasingly as a third, emerging generation of environmentalists. They are not outsiders. They are to be found in their hundreds of thousands within the walls of bureaucracies, financial institutions, universities, trades unions, professional associations and elsewhere. They have all been infected with the environmental virus and they carry it with them wherever they work.

The Green Alliance bridges the centuries, it has learnt to bridge issue and institutional boundaries. It must now become an even stronger bridge between the first two generations of environmentalists and this emerging third generation.

The Green Alliance has always been a catalyst, accelerating the delivery of environmental solutions, opening up new avenues for environmental action, re-defining the boundaries of the possible. We began in the year Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States and John Lennon was assassinated. CNN began broadcasting the same year.

I do not think any of us really thought then about where we would be in twenty-five years time. Somewhere, in the most secret recesses of our hearts, we might have wished that our job would be done and the environment would be at the centre of politics. I do not think that any of us had really grasped the scale of the task we had set ourselves.

Well, times have changed. The need for the Green Alliance has grown rather than diminished. We still have that catalytic role to play in the environmental community. But the tasks facing that community have changed too.

There are three strategic challenges that we must address as we go forward into our second quarter century. Each is important in its own right but together they comprise the breakout by environmentalists from the green ghetto.

The first is to communicate better. I do not mean more. We understand the environment better than we do people. We often seem to think that if we tell people more about the issues, give them more facts, better pictures, a deeper analysis that is all we have to do to protect the environment.

This means we too often sound as if we are only concerned with our own preoccupations and have no interest in theirs. We need to frame our arguments in terms that resonate more immediately with others.

Without a stable climate national security and economic prosperity are impossible, the world will not be fairer, communities will not be

stable, families will be hurt, personal opportunities will be limited, our children's future will be stolen. But we rarely sound as if we are talking about those everyday concerns.

The second is to get real about political discourse. The dominant language of debate among politicians is over how much gets spent by whom on what. Too often we appear to be more interested in winning the argument than changing the outcome. Changing environmental outcomes in the twenty first Century will require some serious money.

Today, we spend just under three hundred billion pounds a year on social protection, health and education. We spend about fifty five billion pounds on internal and external security. We spend a fraction over seven billion pounds on the environment. Do you really believe those are the right proportions to ensure the continued well being of the British people as our environmental problems accumulate faster than we are finding solutions for them?

Thirdly, we must build stronger institutions to defend the environment. We build institutions to consolidate and express our values – to make them manifest in the world. It is a strange thought that as environmental problems have become more pressing our national and international environmental institutions have become weaker.

What does it tell us about our government's real values that on a whim, without a by your leave, it could re-arrange its environmental institutions in a way no-one in the whole environmental community would ever have proposed? The same government is now moving around its institutional assets for nature conservation on the basis of an anecdotal analysis by a businessman with little understanding of either government or the environment.

I make these points not so much to criticise the government - though I did quite enjoy that - as to point out how weak our community's grasp on political power is in reality. Imagine a government proposing to abolish the Ministry of Defence on the grounds that we had won the Cold War. The Navy could now become part of the Department of Transport to protect our shipping and the Army could go to the Department for International Development to help with the occasional adventure in a small state

somewhere. The Air Force could be privatised and sold off to British Airways.

If we do not have strong institutions to promote the environment we have no hope of making a transition to sustainable development. If we cannot protect the ones we have, how can we hope to build the ones we need?

There are, of course, many other challenges that must be met if the environment is to be at the heart of twenty first Century politics. I have picked three that seem to me to be particularly urgent. You will each have your own set. But whatever is on our lists, the Green Alliance will be central to translating idea into action, dream into reality, fear into hope.

I do not believe that the world is fundamentally short of the resources, capital or technology to offer a decent life to all of the eight billion inhabitants it will soon have. I do believe we are short of the capacity to put those resources capital and technology together in ways that are sustainable. And we are increasingly short of time.

Building that capacity, aligning our choices so that they add up to something we can all live with, is politics. By politics I do not mean the degraded, and increasingly, degrading, battle for the headlines that currently passes for politics in our age of celebrity. I mean the art of making collective choices, of harnessing what Abraham Lincoln called 'the better angels of our nature', to a profoundly important purpose.

I do not doubt that the 'better angels' are there, nor that they can be reached and mobilised to pursue the purpose we all share. Nor do I doubt that in this room are the people with the energy, foresight and commitment to drive that mobilisation. It is the Green Alliance's task to help us make those efforts add up to more than their parts.

I wish it well for the next twenty-five years.