Environmentalism has all the hallmarks of a left-wing cause: a class of victims (future generations), an enlightened vanguard who fights for them (the eco-warriors), powerful philistines who exploit them (the capitalists), and endless opportunities to express resentment against the successful, the wealthy and the West. The style too is leftist: the environmentalist is young, dishevelled, socially disreputable, his mind focused on higher things; the opponent is dull, middle aged, smartly dressed, and usually American. The cause is designed to recruit the intellectuals, with facts and theories carelessly bandied about, and activism encouraged. Environmentalism is something you join, and for many young people it has the quasi-redemptive and identity-bestowing character of the twentieth-century revolutions. It has its military wing, in Greenpeace and other activist organisations, and also its intense committees, its odium theologicum and its campaigning journals. Environmentalists who step out of line like Bjørn Lomborg are denounced at the important meetings, and thereafter demonized as heretics. In short, it has the appearance of those secular religions, like socialism, communism, and anarchism, which turned the world upside down during the twentieth century. Hence conservatives are instinctively opposed to it, and begin to look around for facts and theories of their own, in order to fortify their conviction that global warming, loss of biodiversity, rising sea levels, widespread pollution, or whatever, are simply left-wing myths, comparable to the "crisis of capitalism" prophesied by the nineteenth-century socialists.

However, the cause of the environment is not, in itself, a left-wing cause at all. It is not about "liberating" or empowering the victim, but about safeguarding resources. It is not about "progress" or "equality" but about conservation and equilibrium. Its following may be young and dishevelled; but that is largely because people in suits have failed to realize where their real interests, and their real values, lie. Environmentalists may seem opposed to capitalism, but—if they understood matters correctly—they would be far more opposed to socialism, with its gargantuan, uncorrectable, and state-controlled projects, than to the ethos of free enterprise. Indeed, environmentalism is the quintessential conservative cause, the most vivid instance in the world as we
know it, of that partnership between the
dead, the living and the unborn, which
Burke defended as the conservative ar-
chetype. Its fundamental aim is not to
bring about some radical reordering of
society, or the abolition of inherited rights
and privileges. It is not, in itself, inter-
ested in equality, except between genera-
tions, and its attitude to private property
is, or ought to be, positive—for it is only
private ownership that confers responsi-
bility for the environment as opposed to
the unqualified right to exploit it, a right
whose effect we saw in the ruined land-
scapes and poisoned waterways of the
former Soviet empire.

But how should conservatives shape
their environmental policies? What laws
should they pass, and what resources
should they protect? The temptation is to
embrace some comprehensive plan, like
Theodore Roosevelt’s plan for national
parks—to protect some part of the envi-
ronment in perpetuity, and meanwhile to
control by law the use of the remainder.
However, such statist solutions go against
the grain for conservatives—they pose a
threat not just to individual liberty but
also to the process (of which the free
market is the paradigm instance) whereby
consensual solutions emerge. State solu-
tions are imposed from above; they are
often without corrective devices, and
cannot easily be reversed on the proof of
failure. Their inflexibility goes hand in
hand with their planned and goal-directed
nature, and when they fail the efforts of
the state are directed not to changing
them but to changing people’s belief that
they have failed. The ruination of the
Dutch and Danish coastal landscape by
banks of hideous windmills is a case in
point. They stand in looming white ranks
on every horizon, waving white arms like
disconsolate ghosts, blighting the land-
scape with their nightmare vision of judge-
ment day. People put up with them be-
cause they have been told that they are
the solution to depleted energy resources.

Yet they produce only a small amount of
power, will never be able to replace the
coal-fired power stations that provide
the bulk of the country’s electricity, and
have all kinds of negative environmental
effects, not least on the populations of
migrating birds. However, states don’t
easily admit to their mistakes; and the
official propaganda continues to speak
as though the windmills were the lasting
proof of socialist rectitude.

Another and more serious example is
observable in the United States. The most
important man-made environmental
problem in this country is that presented
by the spread of the suburbs. Suburban-
isation causes the increasing use of au-
tomobiles, and the dispersal of populations
in ways that exponentially increase the
consumption of energy and non-degrad-
able packaging. Conservatives argue that
this is a result of freedom and the market.
People settle outside the towns because
that is what they want. They are moving
out in search of green fields, wooded
gardens, tranquillity—in short, their own
little patch of nature. But this is not so.
They are not moving out in search of a
natural environment, but in search of a
suburban environment, and they are do-
ing so because the suburban environ-
ment is massively subsidized by the state.
The roads, the infrastructure and the
schools—all are state investments, which
entirely imbalance the natural economy
of the town, and make it easier, safer and
cheaper to live on the edge of it—an edge
that is constantly moving further from
the centre, so destroying the advantages
offered to those who move to the suburbs
just the year after they move. The mecha-
nism here is not a free market mechanism.
Much of the expansion of the suburbs
proceeds by the exercise of “eminent
domain”—that provision in American law
which gives the official bodies powers of
expropriation equal to, and sometimes
exceeding, the powers exerted by the
socialist governments of Europe. Roads
are one obvious instance of this, and the mania for building them in order to maintain traffic flows at a level arbitrarily imposed by official bodies, is the most important cause of the reckless mobility of American society. The true market solution to the problem of traffic congestion—which is to get out of your car and walk—is not, in America, available, since there is no way that you could walk to your destination. Be it the shop, the church, the school or just your nearest friend, suburbanization has put your goal beyond pedestrian reach.

But you cannot live in the centre of the cities anymore, the suits complain: they’re not safe. Downtown is for blacks and Hispanics; for bums and drop-outs; the schools are appalling, the crime-rate soaring and the place rife with drugs, alcohol and prostitution. Well yes, that’s exactly what happens, when the state subsidizes the suburbs, imposes zoning laws that prevent proper mixed use in the towns, and engages in its own gargantuan housing projects which drive the middle classes out of the city centers. All this occurs in defiance of the market solution and, as Jane Jacobs pointed out in The Death and Life of American Cities, it deprives the city of its eyes and its ears, of its close communities and natural fellowship. Do the Italian cities have crime-ridden centers like the American? Why is it that everyone wants to live in the middle of Paris and not on the edge?

I mention the example not only because it illustrates how far environmental damage has advanced and how difficult it will be to rectify it, but also because it illustrates two rather more important points: first, the mistaken view that it is the market, and not the state, that has created the problem; and secondly the equally mistaken view that the environment can be discussed without raising questions of aesthetics. In my view the problems come precisely when we interrupt the normal ways in which people solve their problems by free interaction. In other words, the problems come from expropriating the paths of rational consensus—as they are expropriated by the state, whenever it uses its powers of eminent domain. And the solutions come when we allow our aesthetic sense to take over, aiming at what looks right, what feels right, and what we can vindicate to the eyes and hearts of our neighbours. American cities have decayed because vast tax-funded resources have been available for the building of roads and housing projects, for the purchase and demolition of otherwise habitable slums, for the horizontal spread of infrastructure, and for the imposition of crazy zoning laws which ensure that where you can buy things you cannot do things, and where you can do things you cannot live. And the solutions to these problems emerge when people, constrained by the natural limitations posed by the need to reach consensual solutions, and without the gargantuan schemes of officialdom, set about building a neighbourhood that looks right to those who live in it, and which is welcoming to those who buy and sell and work.

This is something that Leon Krier has illustrated, in his designs for Poundbury on the Prince of Wales’s estate in Dorset. As architect in charge he has imposed no overarching plan, no zoning, no publicly owned building, and only those roads that the houses themselves require. He has not set any limit to height but only to the number of stories of the houses, and left people free to build as they choose, provided only that their houses fit in with those of their neighbors, using materials and details that conform to a publicly accepted aesthetic, and defining public spaces and streets that are endorsed by the population as spaces and streets of their own. The result is an aesthetic success, and for that very reason an environmental success: compact, sparing in its use of space, with roads that are narrow
but not congested since you don’t need to drive on them to reach your natural destination, be it shop, pub, friend or school. Energy consumption per head is a fraction of American suburban levels, and crime, in those self-policing streets, is non-existent.

Needless to say, leftists hate Poundbury: so stuffy, so cosy, so much a sign of aristocratic patronage and bourgeois ownership. Its very nature as a consensual solution to the problem of urbanisation, and the absence of a socialist town council with vast amounts to spend on infrastructure, social housing and the well-meaning maintenance of criminals, has made it a symbol of environmental sin. Even the relative absence of automobiles has not saved Poundbury from condemnation. The automobile, an object of leftist contempt and hostility when driven by ordinary bank-managers, is a symbol of emancipation and equality when driven by the real working class. The absence of cars from the streets of Poundbury is therefore read as an absence of the proletariat: the whole thing is just a Christmas-card fantasy of the retired middle classes, and one that by-passes and obscures the need for real and “sustainable” solutions to the problems of modern housing. It is, in the end, precisely the respect paid to aesthetic values that gets up the leftist nose: only the anti-aesthetic of the modernists and the futurists has any appeal on the left, since only such an aesthetic can be reconciled with the burning desire of leftist movements in every age and clime, which is to tear things down or, failing that, to blow them up.

But look at the solutions that leftists, over the years, have admired, and you will surely learn to distrust their judgement. The great housing projects, inspired by the rhetoric of socialists like Gropius, Meyer and Le Corbusier, which have invariably involved the clearing of vast areas, and which have themselves had to be demolished within twenty years—what kind of an environmentally friendly solution were they? The crazy idea that power and other facilities should be seen as “public goods,” to be secured by the state on terms dictated by the state—what is this quintessentially leftist idea, if not the root cause of our growing environmental problems? Not only has the “public good” approach to energy and infrastructure catalyzed the unsustainable spread of populations. It has removed from ordinary people the obligation to think long and hard about their use of energy, and to make the kind of deals with their neighbors, which would produce sustainable solutions to real problems. It has made energy into a massive collective problem precisely by destroying the sense that it is, for each of us, a real and challenging individual choice.

Here is another example of what I am getting at: light pollution. Okay, this is not a major environmental disaster, not yet at least. All it does is consume a lot of energy uselessly, burn away the night sky, disrupt migration patterns and the life-cycles of insects, make it easier for burglars and rapists to find their targets and deprive us of the most beautiful of all natural spectacles and the source of the wonder and tranquillity without which...
we are less likely to see the point of being alive. Small losses perhaps. But would these losses have occurred, if the provision of power, roads, services and utilities had been the responsibility of each pioneer, and not of the government? Once available anywhere, electric light is turned on everywhere, shone with ruthless and half mad exultation into the eyes of God, to make its own contribution to the biological imbalances that we are now encountering.

How should conservatives respond? Hemming in a bit of nature and giving it the status of a national park does something to keep things going. But it is a temporary solution and suffers from all those state-engendered defects that I have just been delineating. The point must always be borne in mind that spoliation occurs for one reason above all others, which is that human beings strive to externalize the cost of everything they do. If they cannot pass on the cost to their neighbors, they will pass it on to future generations. And the most effective instrument ever devised for externalizing the cost of individual actions is the state. Its impersonal, administrative and self-justifying nature makes it a perfect vehicle for absorbing the costs of my action now, and depositing them on the unknown others who will one day have to deal with my detritus. In general, therefore, the more the state intrudes into our transactions, the easier it is to escape the cost of them, and the worse the long-term environmental damage. There are exceptions to that rule of thumb, but they should not distract us from its general truth. Nor should they distract us from the complementary truth, that the most effective way of ensuring that people internalize their costs is to ensure that they encounter, in fact or in feeling, those upon whom they would otherwise inflict them. Small-scale dealings between neighbors are self-correcting, and the free rider is seldom allowed to get away with it for long. If the people of a village are charged with disposing of their own waste, you can be sure that they will do so in the most ecologically acceptable way. If a state-owned cart comes each week to collect it, then the villagers will be largely indifferent to the fact that it is disposed of in ways that poison some distant waterway.

If we are to find long-term solutions we need to find the motives that keep people in real and reciprocal relation with each other, whether here and now, or across the generations. These motives exist and have been central to conservative thinking, just as they have been absent from thinking on the left. They comprise the two states of mind from which conservatism arose in the eighteenth century, and which distinguish conservatism from all its phony libertarian and cosmopolitan substitutes: the love of beauty, and the love of home. From Burke and de Maistre to Oakeshott and Kirk, the leading conservative thinkers have devoted much of their thought to the problems of aesthetics, knowing that our search for beauty is not just a matter of private whim, of no lasting concern to the species, but on the contrary a way in which we strive to shape the world to our needs, and our needs to the world.

Perhaps the most persistent error in aesthetics is that contained in the Latin tag that de gustibus non est disputandum—that there is no disputing tastes. On the contrary, tastes are the things that are most vigorously disputed, precisely because this is the one area of human life where dispute is the whole point of it. As Kant argued, in matters of aesthetic judgement we are “suitors for agreement” with our fellows; we are inviting others to endorse our preferences and also exposing those preferences to criticism. And when we debate the point we do not merely rest our judgement in a bare “I like it” or “It looks fine to me”; we search our moral horizons for the considerations that can be brought to judgement’s aid. Just con-
sider the debates over modernism in architecture. When Le Corbusier proposed his solution to the problem of Paris, which was to demolish the city and replace it with a park of scattered glass towers and raised walkways, with the proletariat neatly stacked in their boxes and encouraged to take restorative walks from time to time on the trampled grass below, he was expressing a judgement of taste. But he was not just saying, “I like it that way.” He was telling us that that is how it ought to be: he was conveying a vision of human life and its fulfilment, and proposing the forms that gave the best and most lucid expression to that vision. And it is because the city council of Paris was rightly repelled by that vision, on grounds as much moral and spiritual as purely formal, that Le Corbusier’s aesthetic was rejected and Paris saved.

Likewise, when I dispute with my leftist friends about the Dutch and Danish windmills—windmills whose blank and spectral faces are now beginning to stare across my native English woods and fields—we don’t just exchange likes and dislikes, as though discussing the rival merits of Cuban and Dominican cigars. We discuss the visual transformation of the countryside, the disruption, as I see it, of a long-established experience of home, and what this means in the life of the farmer, and the presence, as my leftist friends see it, of the real symbols of modern life, which now stand on the horizon of the farmer’s world, summoning him to the realities which he has avoided for far too long. By disputing tastes in this way we are not just striving for agreement. We are working our way towards a consensual solution to long-term problems of settlement: we are discovering the terms on which we might live side by side in a shared environment, and how that environment should look in order that we can put down roots in it. Conceived in this way aesthetic judgement is the primary form of environmental reasoning: it is the way in which human beings incorporate into their present decisions the long-term environmental impact of what they do.

It has been normal for human beings, down the ages, to find the sight of garbage heaped in the street aesthetically repugnant: hence the standard approach to garbage has been to bury it out of sight—a perfect example of a consensual aesthetic solution that also protects the environment. Likewise the aesthetic revulsion towards litter is the motive from which a consensual solution to non-degradable packaging might one day emerge—for it is a revulsion that already incorporates a long-term vision of the moral and spiritual unseemliness of this kind of waste. And the ecological disaster of the American city stems almost entirely from the fact that—at a certain point—aesthetic principles were abandoned, neighbourhoods were demolished and rebuilt by people who neither lived in them nor looked at them, and building types were adopted on grounds that were never subjected to aesthetic appraisal. The business of building the city was prized free from the constraints contained in aesthetic judgement and surrendered to the utilitarian madness of the bureaucrats.

Leftists are, on the whole, hostile to aesthetic solutions, dismissing them as cosy, comfortable or kitsch. They campaign against the classical revival in architecture as “pastiche,” and against the New Urbanism of people like Krier. They see the countryside conservationist movements as the work of privileged people trying to monopolize the views from their windows. Sometimes their arguments have a point; but their hostility to aesthetic judgement goes deeper than the arguments that occasionally justify it. Consensual solutions, like the old pattern-books of vernacular architecture, which enabled people to slot their houses into a common street, and to build side by side without offending the neighbor,
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posed laws. Nationality is a form of territorial attachment. But it is also a proto-legislative arrangement. And it is through developing this idea, of a territorial sentiment that contains the seeds of sovereignty within itself, that conservatives make their distinctive contribution to ecological thinking.

Rather than attempt to rectify environmental and social problems on the global level, conservatives seek local controls, and a reassertion of local sovereignty over known and managed environments. This means affirming the right of nations to self-government, and to the adoption of policies that will chime with local loyalties and sentiments of national pride. The attachment to territory and the desire to protect that territory from erosion and waste remain a powerful motive, and one that is presupposed in all demands for sacrifice that issue from the mouths of politicians. For this motive is the simple and powerful one, of love for one’s home.

Take the example of Great Britain. Our environment has been a preoccupation of political decision-making for a very long time. Landscape, agriculture, and climate have been iconized in our art and literature and become foundational for our sentiments of national identity. Our planning laws, immigration laws, and transport strategies until recently reflected this. However, we also know that our country is overcrowded, that its environment is being eroded by urban sprawl, commuter traffic and non-biodegradable waste, that its agriculture is under threat from European edicts and that—largely on account of the recent surge in immigration—our population is growing beyond our capacity to absorb the environmental costs. Sentiments of national loyalty can be called upon to gain support for policies that would control these entropic effects, and which would reflect the long-standing conservative goal, of maintaining an inherited body politic in being, as an autonomous and self-reproducing unit. At this local, national, level, coherent environmental policies and coherent conservative policies seem to me to coincide.

And it is only at this local level that I believe it is realistic to hope for improvement. For there is no evidence that global political institutions have done anything to limit the global entropy; on the contrary, by encouraging communication around the world, and by eroding national sovereignty and legislative barriers, they have fed into that global entropy and weakened the only true sources of resistance to it. I know many environmentalists who seem to agree with me that the World Trade Organization is now a threat to the environment, not merely by breaking down self-sufficient and self-reproducing peasant economies, but also by eroding national sovereignty wherever this places an obstacle before the goals of multinational investors. And many seem to agree with me that traditional communities deserve protection from sudden and externally engineered change, not merely for the sake of their sustainable economies, but also because of the values and loyalties that constitute the sum of their social capital. The odd thing is that so few environmentalists follow the logic of this argument to its conclusion, and recognize that we too deserve protection from global entropy; that we too must retain national sovereignty as our greatest political asset in the face of it; and that we too must retain what we can of the loyalties that attach us to our territory, and make of that territory a home.

Yet, in so far as we have seen any successful attempts to reverse the tide of ecological destruction, these have issued from national or local schemes, to protect territory recognized as “ours”—defined, in other words, through some inherited entitlement.

What hope is there that conservative politicians will respond to that argument, and recognize that the environment is
their cause, and not the cause of their opponents? Among the frail and tentative expressions of political opinion that define the new British Conservative Party some vague and apologetic remarks have been made which, kindly interpreted, might be seen as a provisional endorsement of the environmentalist agenda. Here in America, however, the GOP remains bullish in its defence of road-building, oil consumption, and grandiose projects. While refusing to subsidize Amtrak or to revive the wonderful railway network, it is subsidizing roads and airlines. Instead of setting its face against the energy industry and its great project to suburbanize the continent, it endorses the ever-increasing abuse of the right of eminent domain to send power lines, roads and bridges to every place that has not yet been overrun by the prevailing madness. It has never responded to the arguments of Jane Jacobs and James Howard Kunstler, or made any move to endorse a genuine American aesthetic that would give comfort to the New Urbanists and their friends. Its response to the growing problem of non-degradable packaging is total silence, and its leading members seem to be entirely happy with an economy that imports millions of tons of plastic every week from China in exchange for America’s only genuinely degradable product, which is the dollar.

Who should we blame for this? Some point their finger at the free marketeers, saying that their philosophy is one that endorses big business, whatever big business might do. But that, I think, would be a mistake. The free market, as defended by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek, is simply an instance of the kind of consensual problem-solving that I have been advocating in this article. The Burkean argument for a partnership across generations is an argument of the same kind, which asks us to recognize that consensual solutions may sometimes require that we consult the interests of the unborn and the dead. What has gone wrong, it seems to me, is not the attachment of conservatives to the market, but the failure to see what a real market solution requires: namely the retreat of the state and its projects from every decision in which local aims and loyalties are at stake. It is surely time for conservative politicians to recognize that, with really big issues, you need to think small.