

# Keeping Green on the agenda

**Despite recent setbacks, the Greens movement is still having a significant impact on world politics. South Africa needs fully-fledged Greens representa-**

**tives to take their place at the negotiating table when the country's constitutional future is hammered out, argues environmental writer JOHN YELD.**

THE 1990's have been heralded as the "decade of the environment". South Africa, too, though buffeted and bruised by the whirlwinds of political change, at last appear to be taking environmental issues seriously, though unanimity in this regard seem as elusive as elsewhere.

Worldwide, green concerns have become inextricably part of people's everyday lives; in Britain, for example, more than four fifths of respondents told a recent opinion poll that "the environment is the most important issue facing the world today", and more than two thirds of them claimed they would be willing to accept zero economic growth, if that was the price for saving their environment.

Much of this popular concern for environmental protection has been translated into political support for the Green Party. In 1988, for example, the party attracted two million votes in elections for the European Parliament. South Africa lagged behind in this regard, although the emergence of Earthlife Africa and changing perceptions among other non-government conservation bodies suggests the formation of a fully-fledged Green Party is only a matter of time.

But given the country's already crowded political arena, is there really a need for yet another organisation? And have recent events elsewhere not suggested that early predictions for the decade were seriously optimistic?

**FOR AT** the end of last year, West Germany's Greens - the vanguard of the movement - were resoundingly thumped during the first elections for a united Germany, and the party failed to retain any seats in the Bundestag, the national parliament. From a high of 8,3 percent of the overall vote in 1987, the Greens' share slumped to just 4,7 percent - below the 5 percent required for representation. Complete annihilation of the Greens movement at national parliamentary level was only averted by the election of two East German Greens.

But Ms Niki Kortvelyssy, convenor of the international committee of the Green Party Council in London, pointed out that one of the main factors in the poor showing of the Greens in these elections was that - surprising though this may seem to outsiders - both the East and West German Greens had opted to oppose unification, and had accordingly contested the elections as separate parties. In addition, each had taken positions relevant to their own electorate.

The East German Greens had reaped the benefit of this anomaly because of their close links with citizens' movements like the New Forum, which had spearheaded the revolution against the former German Democratic Repub-

lic government. But in the Federal Republic (West Germany), environmental issues had been forced down the agenda by the unification issue and the electorate's belief that other parties had adopted environmental protection into their political manifestos.

This latter factor was to the Greens' credit, Ms Kortvelyssy argued. "It seems a tragic irony that the heritage of the partition of Germany, which predated the launch of the Greens by a generation, should now be one of the factors in a serious electoral setback for the party. Nevertheless, Greens parties are being established all over the world and are entering parliaments under the kind of proportional representation which will inevitably be introduced in Britain as it integrates with Europe.

"Such a world-wide trend is not likely to grind to a halt because of one regional anomaly in Germany," she concluded.

Indeed, less than two months later, the Greens reversed their losses and increased their vote substantially in elections for the Hesse regional parliament, forming a "red-green" majority with the Social Democrats. Their renewed support was closely linked to strong anti-Gulf war feelings in Germany, and in that sense was perhaps not a true test of the electorate's response to the Greens' sometimes controversial environmental stance.

**THERE ARE** those Greens who argue that the loss of parliamentary representation is no bad thing and that the movement functions best in an informal capacity. Advocates of this theory include Ms Gabrielle Bietze of Berlin, who wrote in a letter to *The Times*:

"Of course it is regrettable that the Greens (or at least those in West Germany) will have no representation in the national parliament on such important global questions as world climate and the ozone layer, nor to be able to exert a progressive influence in the areas of peace and abortion policies.

"What that will mean is that the Greens will have to express themselves more strongly outside parliament, via campaigns, demonstrations and blockades - which, ironically, for a large part of the membership will mean a return to political roots. Although historically the party may be said to have failed, it still has a very clear future - as a pressure group which

is no longer hindered by the need to make parliamentary compromises."

But for Joschka Fischer, German Greens leader in the Hesse parliament and a member of the "Realos" (pragmatist) wing of the party, there was no doubt that parliamentary representation was vital. In an analysis of his party's failure in last year's elections, the former Minister of the Environment said:

"We ignored at our peril the laws of political physics and were asking

for trouble by taking too low a political profile. Our lack of structure and the absence of strong personalities at federal level left us unable to project ourselves ... In order to survive we will have to become a real party, a party committed to environmental reform."

**IF THERE** is anything for environmentally minded South Africans to learn from this European experience, then it is probably that the formation of a Green Party, whose major political philosophy is protection of the environment, is now an urgent priority.

It is true that existing political groupings in South Africa are increasingly introducing environmental components into their manifestos. The Democratic Party led the way, but it has - or rather, is - being followed by both the ANC and the PAC. The latter in particular is reported to have commissioned a highly professional, comprehensive environmental policy document for consideration by members.

However, if environmental protection is to be a feature of the new constitution for South Africa, it is vital that specialists are among those negotiating its expected stormy passage. If Fischers' comments are anything to go by, the realists among Germany's Greens have come to the conclusion that environmental lobbying appears most effective from within formal political structures. Also, the Namibian experience of the transition to a constitutional democracy has demonstrated that environmental issues can be dropped from the agenda when the political bargaining starts. Swapo commissioned the drawing up of special environmental features for their proposed constitution; by the time the final version had been approved by the constituent assembly, these clauses had been dropped.

In South Africa, successful constitutional negotiations are likely to be substantially more drawn-out, the bargaining tougher, the political trade-offs more extensive - and environmental protection could be one of the first casualties, particularly when highly controversial land issues come up for discussion. □

**John Yeld is a South African journalist, currently based in London.**

*(With acknowledgement to The Argus)*