A voice of our own - the need for an alternative public space

Working under pressure

I was in the Stephen's Green shopping centre in Dublin recently, and I was hit by the question of what had happened to the last fifteen years of my life and my friends' lives. All those years, all that energy, all those projects - we were convinced, at least at times, that we were building the new Jerusalem, that we had seen the future and it was us. But all the time, the other four million people in this state, in *their* own everyday activities of working, shopping and relaxing, were pushing in the other direction, and creating this other reality, the cities that we have and not the cities we had hoped for. And we have also contributed to that, in the rest of our lives, when we were not standing around on the street or sitting around in meetings. So there is a lot, in the most basic terms of people's time, going into making things worse, and pitifully little, pitifully few people with little enough time or resources, trying desperately to push in the other direction.

I think this explains something of the difficulties faced by the alternative movement in Ireland. We *are* under pressure; we're each trying to push against the everyday activities of a hundred or a thousand other people, and in a sense against ourselves as well. And of course the stakes are very high indeed. So the pressure becomes a pressure for results.

That pressure for results leads to a particular kind of tunnel vision in many, many campaigns and organisations. The issues are almost thrown at us, one after another, and all we can do is try and respond as effectively as possible to whatever we're presented with. So there's a great tendency towards instrumentalism, towards looking at things purely in terms of *getting results,* even simply to get that issue out of the way and move on to the next. And there are very very few of us, and our resources - even of the "big" organisations - are pitifully small compared to, say, just one medium-sized tech. So the only way many of us find to keep going is by turning up the moral heat on ourselves and on others; this has to be done, that has to be done, I really have to do this because ? and so on. We build campaigns and organisations based on putting ourselves and each other under moral obligation, and responding to the difficulties this causes by turning up the moral heat again. No wonder so many people burn out sooner or later.

A sustainable movement culture

I want to suggest that all this pressure for results, focus on the immediate aims of our campaigns and our organisations, all this heat and all this hassle, is not entirely helpful. We have a long way to go. We have some very serious opposition to face. Realistically, we could still be here doing this in fifty years' time - if we're all around that long. So we need to think about the problem of *sustainability,* not just in individual campaigns and organisations, but in the movement as a whole.

Now the academic literature on the subject defines social movements, not as groups or organisations, but as the *networks* between individuals, groups and organisations (this is Mario Diani's definition). So in a sense this conference is a sort of manifestation of the environmental movement: it isn't a meeting between representatives of organisations, but one particular kind of networking between people who are involved in all kinds of different groups and organisations in this

area. It's a fairly unusual one, of course, but maybe it gives you a sort of metaphorical idea of what it means to say that the movement is the network, not the organisations.

Networks and cooperation

So what makes this networking actually possible? Well, it isn't just that the secretary of one campaign takes down a directory and looks for the phone number of the office of an organisation. That happens, of course, but it's not an expression of a movement. That happens if I pick up the phone to try and find out when Government Publications are going to make such and such a bill available. Most of the time networks draw on two things: they draw on a shared *movement identity* and they draw on a shared *movement culture*.

So it's possible for a conference like this to happen because we all hear "environmental movement" and one way or another say, "yes, that means something to me, I don't mind spending a weekend on that". Or it's possible for me to go down to Waterford, without knowing anyone down there beforehand, and find myself involved in two or three separate things going on there, and be able to ask people to give me a hand with my own projects. So networking and cooperation draw on this sense of identity.

They also draw, though, on a shared culture. After all, the usual way to organise something is to start from the people you know, and the people they know. So our networks are very often also networks between specific people: sometimes we get together to do a magazine, and sometimes we're doing street theatre. Sometimes we're trying to organise a fair trade fair, and sometimes we're doing Agenda 21. Or whatever. And very often these networks are far longer lasting than specific campaigns, because they're built into the rest of our lives. They're about friendship, they're about doing things together that aren't necessarily all that activist - going for coffee, having parties, weekend sessions and all the rest of it. Even the managers know this, or they wouldn't be covering the country with golf clubs! If you want to work together with people, it helps to know them, it helps if you're both living in the same kind of cultural world.

Skills and understanding

This culture is, or should be, also a great resource in terms of *skills* and *understanding*. I might not have that much of an idea how to go about getting a particular project together, or who to get in touch with. But I know who to ask. There are people out there who've tried doing the kind of things I'm looking at doing, and maybe they can be persuaded to come along and give us the benefit of their experience, so we don't make the same mistakes twice and recognise problems when they come up again, as they do. They might even write about their experience, so people can find out something about the realities of living in a commune, working as a coop, running a grassroots organisation, or organic farming before learning the hard way! And we have so many different skills locked up in these heads of ours. We are a movement of experts at building campaigns on a shoestring, making pigs fly, building something out of nothing and all the rest of it.

And we have many hundreds of years of campaigning *experience* between us. A movement culture is, or can be, a resource for helping us share that experience, and the *understanding* that comes out of it. Between us, we've spent so long trying to change this society that we should actually have a very good sense of how it works and how it's changing. We should be the best sociologists and political scientists in the business, because we can put all our different experiences and perspectives

together and get the kind of three-dimensional view that spiders, with all those eyes, have of the world. But in fact I think I've moved into the "optative mode", as they say - I'm describing things, not as they are, but as they should be. We *should be* in this situation, but very often we're not - because we don't see its value, we don't see what it's worth, we aren't prepared to "waste time" on talking to each other except when we're already organising something very specific. And I think we pay the price of that.

We pay the price of that because these are actually *necessary parts* of organisation, if we don't want to keep on reinventing the wheel, if we'd actually like to learn from experience, if we'd like to put our heads together once in a while and get a good sense of where we stand in this society and this political system. But because of the pressure we're under, it just seems like wasting time.

Sustainability ? and burnout

Along with a few friends, I've been involved in trying to bring various people from the different parts of the Irish left together, just to stand back for a minute from their different parties and organisations, and to talk about how they see the situation and where they think it might go. Very gentle stuff, just a bunch of people who've mostly met each other, talking about the world - something 95% of the population can manage without any difficulty. And we even managed to have anarchists and Labour Party members, Greens and Militant people, Dem Left and non-aligned activists, sitting round in the one living room. But always this pressure is there in the background, always it seems like the most superfluous thing, the first thing to go when the next push is one. Like people who are so stressed they should really be meditating or talking to a counsellor, but who just don't have time to do so because of all the other important things they need to be doing.

This brings me back to *burnout*. Now one of the things about burnout is that very often, campaigning does not offer much of a motivation in itself. You almost *have* to keep your nose to the grindstone to identify with the next little organisational task, the next bit of administration, the next form to be filled - so that you can keep on pressuring yourself to do more. You have to say "this is fundamental because of this, and this is fundamental because of this", and so on - everything is crucial to everything else, and they all have to be done yesterday, if at all possible.

So organisations, and campaigns, are not necessarily sustainable in themselves. They may be sustainable in the immediate sense of having scraped together whatever budget they need for the next six months, whether that's ?50 or enough to run an office with a part-time secretary and a couple of CES workers. But typically they aren't sustainable in the sense that they don't provide people who are working in them with the motivation and support they need to keep on going. So I think I know more people now who've left the Green Party, just to take a case I know, than I now know within it, and that's mostly not because of policy disagreements. One person I talked to said that once he stopped, he couldn't understand why he'd kept doing it for so long. And I think this isn't a unique feeling.

Motivation and mobilisation

Campaigning and administration are generally not self-sustaining in terms of *motivation,* and often they're not self-sustaining in terms of *mobilisation* either. It's one thing to get yourself set up on a proper professional basis, sort out the paperwork, get a real office, and all the rest of it. That's fine, and I have no argument with it. But what it typically brings with it is an isolation from the rest of the movement. You meet other people - I've had this happen to me a lot - and you

can't actually explain to them what you're currently up to, even though your head is buzzing with it, because it's just so trivial, or so specialised, or so administrative, that there's no earthly reason why they'd be interested.

So activism can be *self-isolating:* the more seriously you take it, the fewer people there are who can connect with what you're doing. And you can get serious problems of numbers. The easy thing to do, and the obvious thing to do, is to call on the people who already have the skills, who understand the situation, who are already sold on the idea. And so most of us wind up wearing six different hats, being two or three or four different campaigns depending on who we're talking to at the time. And then we wonder why there aren't that many new people coming into it. This would even be true if all we needed was people's money, or people's votes. But if we need people's time, and their energy, and their skill, then we have a real problem getting what we need.

Sometimes we *can* find enough people, of course, and sometimes we *can* find the motivation for what we're doing - otherwise nothing would ever happen. My point is simply that neither the people nor the motivation are generated by the organisations; they are generated by the movement culture. If we mobilise the networks of people we know, what we're doing is mobilising a culture, mobilising a life-world, as someone (J?Habermas) put it: bringing out that prior understanding of what's going on, that commitment to particular aims and ideals, and that awareness of the kinds of skills and situations that are likely to be involved. And our own motivation depends on what's going on in the rest of our lives - whether we go back from the campaign into a supportive situation, whether we can talk about what we're doing with our friends, or whether it's just hanging their in thin air, isolated from the rest of our life.

And my own impression and experience is that the movement culture that actually exists is just too thin a soil to support all these greedy plants we want to grow in it. It doesn't go deep enough, it doesn't have the nutrients, it can't regenerate itself as fast as we're exploiting it. So there's a real problem of sustainability here - how long can we keep the campaigning up for?

The last important thing about movement culture is that it's a crucial tool for changing the way the rest of the society thinks and acts. This is very clear if you look, for example, at the women's movement. After twenty-five years of hard campaigning, some of the toughest campaigns in Irish politics, it's arrived at the situation where one of the most common feelings is "I'm not feminist, but ?" People don't identify with the politics that much, or with the campaigning organisations - but they've picked up and identified with the new ways of feeling that come along with the movement. "I'm not a feminist, but I want women to get equal treatment and respect". So the movement culture matters, maybe even more than the campaigning itself.

The weaknesses of movement culture

Now in some ways, we have a very weak movement culture here in the environmental movement and here in Ireland. We have some important resources, but I think we're exploiting them at such a rate that there'll be nothing left in five years, never mind for the next generation. To take just a few pointers to the problem:

There is a terrible lack of serious *strategic* thinking. This is the case within the Green Party, it's the case within the alternative press, and those are the places where you'd expect to find the most debate on strategy and policy. There is so little of a debate, you could say, that we don't even have a clear sense of what the dividing issues actually are. We import arguments from Germany ("fundis" and "realos") or

America ("deep greens" and "light greens") because we've never actually worked these issues out for ourselves in our own context.

One reason for this, of course, is that we have very few organisations which are *complex* enough to have much space for this kind of thinking. And even within those, interest is minimal or non-existent. So our experience with *An Caorthann,* for example, during the time it was funded by the Green Party, was that a large proportion of the party members, when they expressed an opinion at all, felt that it was a waste of time and money to have a journal devoted to strategy and debate. What they wanted, although it's not what they eventually got, was a newsletter with the dates of internal events. So this is a bit of a paradox: people in a Green political party who don't actually want to read, think or talk about the basic questions of what Green politics is there for, what direction it should be going in, and so on. So you get an activism for activism's sake, without any real discussion of what it's all for, and it's not at all unusual for people in different branches to have thoroughly different ideas of what the point of the party is in the first place.

But there are other problems as well. I've said that in one sense, a movement is the networks between organisations. That doesn't mean, of course, that a movement is restricted to the people who personally know each other, but this is very often how it is taken in practice. Over the past couple of years I've been to meetings of the alternative press, to the Mustard Seed meeting, to Green Party events, to Local Agenda 21 meetings, to meetings of Latin America support groups, and all kinds of other things. And the most striking similarity between them is how each little circle of people seems to be convinced that *they are the movement.* No-one else really exists. And if you have that kind of attitude, why would you bother trying to reach out beyond the people you already know? Why would you bother trying to overcome the differences between you and other people? They're not part of the movement anyway. In fact, you can even get self-righteous and ask why they aren't involved in whatever your own pet obsession is!

So building a *movement culture* means, among other things, getting beyond the specificities of each particular context, trying to break down the barriers and avoid this situation I've seen so often where you introduce two people to each other and they don't have anything to talk about because they're working in even only marginally different areas and they know a slightly different set of people. A movement culture is the synthesis of all these different little subcultures - so we're talking about bringing them into contact and communication with each other. And this is where the alternative press should come in.

The "actually existing" alternative press

I don't want to go into too much detail about the alternative press as it is. For one thing, I'm acutely conscious of how difficult it is in practice to keep an alternative magazine going at all. And we're a small enough group (I know of about 15 magazines only) that it's difficult to make specific criticisms without them immediately becoming personal criticisms. And, most importantly, these are things that we're trying to overcome: we're trying to overcome them in networking between the alternative magazines, and more immediately we're trying to overcome them within *An Caorthann* itself. So I hope it won't disappoint people too much if I stick to a few, fairly general comments here about the actual organisation of the alternative press.

Much information, little communication

The most obvious place to start, I suppose, is with the question of communication, or the lack of it. What should an alternative press be, if not a place for communication? And yet the weird thing is that it isn't. The word you hear most often isn't communication but "information". And the thing about information is that it doesn't imply any sort of connection between people. Here I am, here you are, here's some information, do with it what you will. There are some advantages to this model, of course, but also some real problems, in terms of what I've already said. In practice, most of what we print is *autistic* communication: it is one-way communication, isolated people writing "at" - never "to" - the rest of the world, people who have either given up in despair on ever getting feedback and response to their ideas, or who don't want it in the first place (and I realise I am talking about myself too here). Thus, we are happy printing technical information about this or that environmental issue. We are happy printing what we think are facts about Celtic deities. But we are not happy actually trying to make contact with the people who read us, trying to reach out to them, convince them, open ourselves up to them. This is not unique to the alternative press, of course; it is a feature of the movement as a whole. We say "environment", or "ecology", or whatever, and assume that it means the same thing to other people as it does to us. The question rarely arises: why are *we* interested in this issue, right now? What is it about deforestation, or alternative healing, or Rio, that strikes a chord with us? In a sense we are caught up in our own symbolic language, fluently gabbling away about the smallest details of whatever topic we've fixed on, but rarely able to stand back from that language for a moment and place *ourselves* in the picture, as the people who find something so important in one particular issue that they are prepared to devote most of their lifetime to it. So the alternative press basically replicates this model: many words, little content. Much information, little communication.

The failure to connect

The phrase that springs to mind is "preaching to the converted", except that preaching still suggests something of an attempt to convince: something of a recognition that even the converted have a wide range of ideas, and an attempt to come to terms with those ideas, transform them, or reinterpret them. But this is what we do not do, by and large: the green spirituality people write about green spirituality to people who are into green spirituality, the environmental scientists write about environmental science issues to the people who are into environmental science, and so it goes. In fact there are subdivisions within those again, and again there is little attempt to reach out beyond them. I have yet to see anything that could honestly be described as a "debate" within the Irish alternative press on any issue. This is painfully clear in our own attempts at networking. The alternative press can be brought together to talk about distribution, and how to cut costs: yet there is precious little interest in actually connecting with each other in terms of *content*. This was our experience at MIDAS, for example. So even among ourselves there is no real sense of what an alternative press might be, how the different magazines might connect to one another, or what their role might be. The furthest we have been able to break out of this trap in *An Caorthann* is to define ourselves as a sort of "meta-"magazine, at one remove from the coalface of campaigns and of the work the other magazines are doing, a place where people can reflect on what they're up to and discuss with one another about the directions things are, or might be, going in. And even this minimal definition is more a matter of theory than of practice. So, like the rest of the movement, the alternative press remains stuck in its own ruts. At the end of the day, the business of writing, producing and distributing is so labour-intensive that the last thing we want to do is think about what it's all *for*. As it is, we probably sell less than 10,000 copies between the lot of us.

The isolation of the alternative press

The flip side of all of this, of course, is that most people in the movement in practice see the alternative press as irrelevant to what they are doing. Trying to get articles about current campaigns is like trying to get blood out of a stone. It seems that most campaigners see the idea of information and discussion as beside the point. Why bother to let other people know what you're up to? What do you mean, step back and think about where we're going? So the alternative press suffers greatly from the pressure for results.

The alternative press is naturally a place where a movement identity is developed, and a movement culture is shared and deepened. It is naturally a place where skills are transmitted and where different people's understandings bounce off one another and become that bit more complex. It is naturally a source of motivation for campaigners and of mobilisation for campaigns. But in fact it is anything but, because none of these figure on our mental maps of the world as in any way related to this all-important business of "getting results".

So the alternative press is also deeply *isolated*. Again I can illustrate this in relation to *An Caorthann*. Our initial aim was to get articles from people who were themselves active campaigners, so that we would actually be representing something of a debate within the movement. But while this hasn't been a complete failure, in practice the activists are outweighed by people like myself who prefer thinking and talking to people within their organisations over the political conflict with the state and corporations or within their organisations - people who are happy to be commenting from the sidelines.

This is of course a normal tension within a lot of us; the difficulty in the alternative press is that our isolation tends to privilege the autistic aspects of our communication. So, wherever we start from, there is a drift towards rant mode, a drift towards seeing oneself as a prophet in the wilderness, a drift towards graphomania. This is no good for the alternative press; it is no good for the movement; and it is no good for the individuals concerned.

The root of all our problems

Now I want to go a little bit deeper into where this situation comes from. I've said that we're all under pressure: the alternative press is under pressure, the movement is under pressure, and we find it difficult to get away from that pressure for long enough to think about where we're going and work towards sustainability. So why is this?

I think I've already given one part of the answer at least at the very start of this paper: the fact that our activities are being countered in practice by the normal, everyday activities of the vast majority of people - and by our own activities "outside the movement". So we're under pressure because we're trying to hold back an avalanche with a newspaper. Why is this? Why is it that there is such a *systematic* force pushing in the other direction in the rest of our lives, and in the lives of other people?

The institutions of destruction

I think it is because, at the end of the day, the forces pushing towards ecological destruction are among the strongest on the planet: a global economic system, increasingly out of control; multinationals who dispose of greater resources than many states; our own state, geared since 1958 to satisfying the needs of those

multinationals; the developing European state, structured around economic growth and the CAP; and an increasingly defensive culture, clinging to the remnants of cultural authority, a cargo-cult belief in "jobs" and a threatened sense of identity.
So this global society we live in is *structured* by economics, by politics, and by culture. In particular, the institutions that operate in ordinary people's lives - including our own - are geared towards an economic system whose logic of accumulation and growth is the driving force behind ecological destruction; towards an authoritarian structure of power that is geared towards neutralising any challenges from below; and towards a culture that is geared to reasserting "normality" at any cost.

In the belly of the beast

This explains not just why we are under such terrific pressure. It also offers another kind of explanation of why we devote so little time to anything that does not fit within a very narrow definition of "results", and why we are so reluctant to talk about what "the environment" actually *means* to us as people: because these same institutions and forces structure *our own* lives. We are also, most of the time, operating within them, in relation to them, on their terms. We are fitting into the extended European state, as we work towards LEADER schemes, for example. We are fitting into the new management culture, as we professionalise our activities. We connect with the cultural supermarket as we offer courses in personal growth. And so on. And when we are not wearing our activist hats, we are of course employed or self-employed within the state or in private business - where else would we be? In our free time, what there is of it, some of us watch TV, others go to the pub, others go to church, or whatever it is.
So we are deeply, deeply embedded in the institutions of a society geared towards the destruction we are trying to prevent. And it is an enormous effort to move away from that in just a single area of our life, to change our views on one issue, to include campaigning as part of what we do when we're not at work, to make a few changes in how our homes are organised. So we move away in one or two areas, but not in others. And other people do the same.
And when we come together as a "movement", what this often means is that we are a conglomeration of people who have all moved away from the culture I've described in one or two aspects of what we think and what we do. We come together around symbolic words like "ecology" or "environment". But the value of those symbols is that they cover over the enormous *differences* between us. If we are keener on giving out information "about" the environment than on thinking about what it actually means in practice to us, this is because we sense the risk of finding out that other people actually mean something completely different by it.

A lowest common denominator movement

You could say, then, that we are a "lowest common denominator" movement. Any of us are individually geared *both* towards the society of destruction *and* towards the movement to prevent that destruction. So we agree not to push things too far, to come together in groups around the few things that we all agree in. And then you get the picture of a movement that is actually only a collection of groups who share this symbol - "environment" - but mean completely different things by it.
What this means, of course, is that we are failing to listen to each other. We are personally "into" a handful of issues, but we are very defensive towards the issues that other people in the movement are in. Far from exploring them in detail, we perceive *their* issues as threatening *our* consensus, and as making it impossible for

us to push *our* issues onto the mainstream agenda. Other people will marginalise the movement, we say, by including irrelevant issues. Irrelevant, that is, to our own priorities.

So we are not learning from each other, but rather we are actively closing off communication with each other in favour of our communication with the institutions of destruction themselves. Each of our organisations and campaigns is trying to fit itself into the world around it, in a sense by denying all the other organisations. So the Green Party, or Greenpeace, to take the most obvious examples, tend to distance themselves from other elements of the movement in order to enhance their credibility with "the media" or "the public". And the rest of us do the same, in our own little ways.

And then it is hardly surprising that we fail to share our experience, our skills, our ways of coping, our support, our understanding. We could only do that on the basis of explicitly identifying ourselves with the *challenge* to the institutions of destruction - but here we are busily *identifying* with those institutions, and telling them that they have nothing to fear from us. As indeed they don't, if we carry on like this.

A thought experiment

Let's try a thought experiment for a few moments. What would it be like if we didn't operate in this way? What would it mean for us to be, not a "lowest common denominator" movement, but a "highest common factor" movement? Well, such a movement would consist of groups who were actively trying to learn from each other, to see how far they could integrate the directions other people in the movement were exploring with what they were up to themselves. So there would be a very lively debate, because of course it would turn out that there were genuine choices to be made, that there were real conflicts involved. But there would also be a sense of a shared learning process, and of developing a common direction.

So we would be talking about a self-confident movement, and a movement that represented an *alternative* to the culture of destruction, rather than forever trying to deny that each individual campaign *does* represent a challenge to that culture. We would be saying "yes, things do have to change". But we would be saying it to other people at the same time as we were putting it into practice ourselves; so instead of a self-righteous insistence on you changing your identity towards what I have already identified myself with, we'd be changing ourselves, and showing that that does not have to be a terrifying experience. We could be an alternative that is fully open to people who are willing to open themselves - because we would ourselves be engaged in that opening, and that transformation. So rather than saying "well, I've dived into this icy water, now it's your turn", we'd be saying "come on in, the water's fine!"

So in this thought experiment we could imagine the environmental movement as *a good place to be;* as an attractive way to live; as something that other people wish they were doing too - and not as an isolating activity fueled by guilt and piling on the obligation, and littered with burnt-out wrecks along the way.

A new role for the alternative press?

It is even possible that the alternative press might have a part to play in this.

If a "highest common factor" movement would be a learning process - if it would involve sharing and exchanging our experiences and our understandings and trying to move towards a more complete sense both of what this society is actually like and

of what directions we need to move in - then the alternative press has a key role to play, by being an *alternative* "public space", a place where this learning process can actually happen. Because if one thing is certain, it is that this learning process is not going to happen on TV, and it will not be on the Leaving Cert syllabus. If it is going to happen anywhere, we need to create the space that it can happen in.

Learning to learn

But a learning process like this would also mean moving from one-way "information" to two-way communication, because it would be about learning from each other, and listening to each other. So it would mean building a new kind of movement culture, one where we were helping each other by sharing practical skills instead of hoarding them; one where we were generating support for each other and motivation for ourselves by exchanges that we came away from feeling better rather than feeling exhausted; one that enabled far more mobilisation by attracting new activists and helping them find their way around; and even one that could claim to offer something of an education for people still trapped in the dominant culture.

This is how good education starts - but to get there, we have to learn how to do this first. We have to learn how to express ourselves without (too much!) fear and aggression, and how to listen and *respond*. And we need to learn *how to learn* - how to broaden our perspectives, take on new ways of thinking and not just indulge our own obsessions.

Living with diversity ? and moving beyond it

So we need to learn about living with a diversity of views. The first and most basic thing this means is of course that we need to acknowledge that other people in the movement are into *different things* from us, and not simply to dismiss them as irrelevant, eccentric, sold-out or whatever else. But then we also need to see how what they are doing relates to what we are doing. Are there ways in which they can complement each other? Can we go in the same direction? And then we need to change both interests, both perspectives, so that this can mean something. We need to have the courage to *challenge* views: to challenge our own views, of course, but also to challenge other people's views. We need to learn that it is not just OK to disagree, but also OK to argue, and OK to change your mind and to try to change other people's minds. And then the alternative press would have its work cut out for it.

In the Buddhist parable of the elephant, blind men are introduced to an elephant. One takes the tail and decides that an elephant is like a rope. One takes an ear and decides that it's like a rhubarb plant. One takes a leg and decides that it's like a tree-trunk?

This is *not* an argument that "all views are equally valid", though it's often quoted as if it was. It's an argument for putting these different partial points of view together and seeing if we can come to a more complete understanding of the world we are in and of what directions we want to go in. In other words, because most of us have only changed a few things, we have a relatively clear picture of what the situation is like in those areas: what the issues are, how the problem works at the moment, what might be a way out. But for other areas, we tend just to adopt the dominant culture's way of thinking about itself. So communication is a way of moving from these partial perspectives towards more complete ones - towards what we could call an "alternative common sense".

Now if we were moving towards communication, we would be moving away from isolation, and away from burnout. Burnout happens when one person is doing the work of ten, because there is no communication and no shared understanding. Burnout happens when we try to play participatory democracy but assume that everybody wants to play in our one. Burnout happens when there are no *reasons* for activism in the rest of our lives, no support and no contact - so we become more and more split in two and carry on on the strength of guilt and bullying ourselves and others into keeping going.

So in this perspective, the movement culture and the alternative press aren't superfluous or trivial at all. They are fundamental parts of a *sustainable* movement, one that doesn't depend on burning up the non-renewable fuel of individual activists' lives.

Rays of hope

Here are three rays of hope to finish with, three things that I think *are* moving in the right direction. The first is *The Garden of Delights* in Dublin. This was another alternative bookshop about to go to the wall; but the local alternative scene decided that this space was too important to let it die. So they took it over as a co-op, and now they're keeping it open seven days a week, on rotas, without pay. They've got a wider range of alternative books than anyone else in Dublin; they have a caf顧oing, they're setting up a multi-media centre with *Catalyst* magazine and an Internet co-op, they're hosting DJs and plays and exhibitions and I don't know what else. So against enormous odds, the alternative culture - not just a couple of burnout candidates - is keeping this space alive. And this is a very practical and concrete form of the kind of "highest common factor" movement I've been talking about - one sort of "space of our own".

A second ray of hope: plans are afoot to host a F*estival of the Alternative Press* in this very place. Unlike our last get-together, this will be a public event. Of course we still want to meet each other and talk about distribution, but I hope we're also going to find time to talk to each other and whoever else turns up about what we think we're doing and where we think we're going. So there may even be a chance, once we've all sold our papers and talked about distribution, to talk about what the alternative press is *for* and what direction it is going in. (This has been provisionally set for Sunday, March 9th, from 12 to 8: contact me for more details.) In the meantime, I've brought copies of the current listing of alternative magazines - almost certainly incomplete - and I can give them to anyone who's interested.

And finally, in my new home of Waterford, I've set up the *Centre for Research on Environment and Community* - which I think is the first such centre on the island. This is going to be a kind of academic resource for the movement, and hopefully it'll be overseen by a council of people involved in the environmental and community movements. And this should offer us something of a space in which we can look at ourselves, and think about what we are doing, *how* we are doing, and where we might want to go - a first little step towards an alternative "common sense". We're hoping to be working on research proposals coming from movement organisations, and to be supervising part-time research by people who are active within the movement - so if either of those ideas rings any bells, get in touch! Along with this (and I think this is another first), we're working on setting up an archive of the Irish alternative press, so that what is written *doesn't* just vanish into oblivion. Again, I've got a flyer for this.

Raymond Williams has this to say: "supposing the real chances of making a different kind of future are fifty-fifty, they are still usually fifty-fifty after the most detailed restatement of the problems? It is only in a shared belief and insistence that there

are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter." What I have tried to suggest in this paper is that there are practical alternatives to the way we are doing things at present. I have argued that a movement that ignores its own culture is organisationally unsustainable. And I think the alternative press may have its own role to play within that, in creating an alternative common sense for the environmental movement, a space of our own.