

## **Objects of Political Desire IX: Should the Greens Embrace Obstructionism?**

**Article by Rui Tavares**

October 12, 2023

According to the so-called Betteridge Law, any headline that ends in a question mark can be answered by the word “no”. The headline above is no exception.

This will come as no surprise to my more attentive readers. Over the last months, I have been sketching out a theory of mobilisation and change around the idea that a green and progressive programme should contain positive visions of a desirable world, and concrete examples of the steps needed to get there – the “objects of political desire” of the title. I have done so mainly in contrast to the technocratic model of political action that has been dominant in recent decades, at least in Europe.

However, my proposal is not the only alternative to the technocratic model. So while my rejection of obstructionism as a strategy for Greens and progressives might be obvious from the outset, I want to explain how I get there.

There is no denying that the Green movement achieved major tactical successes in its early days by obstructing the construction and deployment of things, from nuclear power plants to ballistic missiles. It is both easier and faster to bring people together in opposition to something than to get them to agree on any detailed policy or proposal. Furthermore, if successfully obstructing a project or plan counts as a political victory for a movement, one may conclude that obstructionism is a sustainable tactic in the long term.

The initial question, however, was whether obstructionism would be a better strategy – not just a tactic – for Greens and progressives than trying to mobilise people through a vision for a better future. A tactic is the planning of actions needed to achieve a short-term goal, whereas a strategy is an overarching vision that animates a movement and allows it to further its ideals, values, and principles in the world. Tactics need to be varied, as what works in a given setting may not work in another, and the multiplicity of events demands different attitudes and responses in each case anyway: it is different to organise a local movement against the building of an urban motorway, for instance, than to do the same in favour of an urban park.

*It is both easier and faster to bring people together in opposition to something than to get them to agree on any detailed policy or proposal.*

A strategic choice, on the other hand, concerns the very nature and identity of a movement. The Green movement may have initially come to the attention of the media and the masses with acts of obstructionism, but political ecology was born in defence of a future – harmonious, sustainable, peaceful, and based on solidarity – to be built together. The famous “four pillars” at the basis of so many Green parties during this last half-century – environmental sustainability, social justice, grassroots democracy, and international peace and human rights – illustrate how Green politics has been conceived from the start as constructive rather than obstructionist. If we elevate obstructionism from a

mere tactic to the strategic core of green politics, we risk creating an opposition between what we are and what we do, and we will be defined more by what we oppose than by what we propose.

Obstructionism is sometimes presented as a necessity rather than a choice, on the basis of the realisation that everything else has not worked. But such defeatism should be rejected: from a long-term perspective, the Green movement has been an incredible success story. Most green ideas and arguments have gone mainstream and have been widely accepted by the majority – and for good reason.

Concerns about sustainability are today much more widespread than in the past, although they have yet to be universally incorporated into policy and economic decisions. Even the most formidable danger we face, climate change, is a debate that we have won in the public square with empirical data, scientific arguments, and a degree of social mobilisation that is incommensurable in scale and nature with the first tactic gains of the 1970s and 1980s.

This does not mean that we have “won” the challenge of climate change, but that from the standpoint of public opinion and civic engagement, this is a debate that it is ours to lose, and that we will only lose if we alienate people by thinking that obstructionist tactics could replace a constructive strategy.

Some ten years ago, Greens in Europe launched the Green New Deal as a plan to respond to the twin threats of the financial and climate crisis. A twenty-first-century iteration of Roosevelt’s New Deal adapted to the ecological demands of our time, the Green New Deal was a huge political success, to the point that other political families (such as progressives in the US) and institutions (such as the EU Commission) tried to recreate that success by devising “Green Deals” of their own. In the EU’s case, the social and “just transition” planks of the original proposal were largely left behind.

*From a long-term perspective, the Green movement has been an incredible success story. Most green ideas and arguments have gone mainstream and have been widely accepted by the majority – and for good reason.*

That, however, should have prompted the Greens to come back to the public offering what they could have legitimately called the “real deal”. Instead, a certain fatigue took over; some in the Green movement have responded to the fact that the plan has not been adopted in full or that it has not been instantaneously effective with a mix of doomerism and despondency.

In these moments, the importance of prioritising concrete improvements in people’s lives cannot be overstated. It’s in times of doubt and hesitancy that showcasing the immediate, positive impacts of sustainability measures becomes crucial in bolstering the momentum of the green agenda while answering to the reactionaries’ stoking of public fears that climate policies are going too far or are too hard for the people to sustain.

This is a lesson that Green parties assimilated from their early history, and that remains valuable for both the Green movement and environmental activists today. Early on, Green politicians realised that following initial tactical successes, people shifted their focus from what they wanted to prevent to what they hoped to achieve. This a political responsibility that we should still welcome and cherish. It means

that people are looking up to the Greens to come up with solutions to be applied in practice. Finding a way out of a crisis and being able to explain what it consists of is one of the best remedies – and possibly the only one – to the fears that reactionaries and authoritarians fuel in public opinion.

In a time of multiple, interwoven, and seemingly unsolvable crises, it is only natural to be anxious about the current state of the world. But we shouldn't let anxiety lead us to believe that we have achieved nothing of worth so far, or that our current situation is desperate.

Individually as well as collectively, the best way to understand and control our anxiety is to review all that we have done and achieved, understand how it has worked among the public, trust the strength of our arguments, and use them as building blocks of a desirable future that will make our present not only more enduring but even enjoyable.

Let others be the movement of fear and gloom. Let us fight in a way that will make people want to join us.

---



Rui Tavares is a Portuguese writer, historian, and member of the parliament for the left-green-libertarian party LIVRE. He is the author of the documentary film *Ulysses: Breaking the Spell of the Crisis to Save Europe*. He was formerly an MEP for Greens/EFA.

Published October 12, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/objects-of-political-desire-ix-should-the-greens-embrace-obstructionism/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*