Green Political Theory and the State

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‘Discursive Sustainability: The State (and Citizen) of Green Political Theory’

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to argue that the concept of the state and related issues are integral elements of green political theory, both in terms of its critique and positive proposals. The focus will be on the idea of sustainability and how its achievement depends on a positive commitment to the idea of a ‘green state’. This idea goes against the anarchistic self-understanding that permeates green political literature. For many green theorists and commentators, that green political theory is basically a contemporary variant of anarchism is to a great extent self-evident. Goodin offers a typical example in declaring that ‘greens are basically libertarians-cum-anarchists’ (1992: 152).

However, unless this affiliation with eco-anarchism is transcended the coherence of green theory cannot be guaranteed. Its theoretical consistency lies, I argue, in the articulation of a green theory of the state (and civil society) and citizenship. I use the idea of a green state as a way of both understanding recent developments in green theory, and, together with the idea of ‘environmental citizenship’, of indicating the direction of its future development.

Core Principles of Green Political Theory

Before I move on to develop these themes, it is necessary to indicate what and how I understand green political theory. For analytical purposes, I conceive of green politics as made up of three core principles or imperatives. In using the idea of ‘core principles’ to define green politics I do not wish to suggest that these principles offer an exhaustive account. These core elements I take to be:

1. a theory of distributive (intergenerational) justice,
2. a commitment to a process of democratization, and
3. the achievement of ecological sustainability.

These are core in the sense that most conceptions of green politics embody these three imperatives to a greater or lesser extent. They are useful as heuristic devices for deciding what is and what is not a conception of green theory. For example, we can understand survivalist green theory (or eco-authoritarianism) as the pursuit of sustainability at the expense of democracy and justice (Ophuls, 1977).

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1 Not to be cited without author’s permission.
What allows us to make sense of its rejection is if we see that green theory embodies democratic norms as well as a concern with sustainability. This is important to stress as some theorists have questioned the green commitment to democracy (Saward, 1993). Democratic practice and norms must be shown to be of intrinsic rather than instrumental value to green politics. However, there are also more instrumentalist arguments that can be used to supplement the former, which suggest that democratic practices such as decentralisation and devolution would, if applied to economic organisation, for example, have beneficial ecological effects (Dryzek, 1990, 1987).

These three aspects of green politics are not assumed to be automatically in harmony with each other. Incompatibility between values that greens espouse is rarely addressed, indeed the general assumption is that all elements are mutually consistent, guaranteeing the coherence of the theory. One reason for this may be that they argue that the unity of green politics is premised on its particular conception of the good life (Dobson, 1990: 8, 88), a particular theory of value (Goodin, 1992: 14) or other some other substantive ethical basis such as Eckerley’s claim that ‘in terms of fundamental priorities, an ecocentric approach regards the proper place of humans in nature as logically prior to the question of what are the most appropriate social and political arrangements for human communities’ (1992: 29). Such conceptions of green politics leave green politics open to the charge that its political project is the realisation of a particular vision of the good, often ‘read off’ from nature. Any conception of the state premised on this would see the state as the ‘enforcer’ of a particular way of life. The coercive aspects of the state are important for the realisation of sustainability, as I argue later on, but in a different (and more traditional) sense than that of either survivalist or ‘moralistic’ green theory.

These approaches make green theory unnecessarily contentious, and casts green politics as ‘ecological morality’ by other means. Although not denying the normative basis of green politics, because, like any other theory it has certain fundamental principles, the above approach makes these normative basis unduly substantive. A weaker, or less substantive ethical basis may serve the interests of green political theory better, viz one that sees green theory as articulating a view of the state that establishes the necessary political framework needed to cope with ecological problems. Within this order people can live their lives as they themselves choose rather than others deciding what the content of their lives should be. In other words, the normative basis of green political programmes should be based on a ‘thin’ as opposed to a ‘thick’ theory of the good. Part of this ‘thin’ theory has to do with the duties of citizenship in instituting and maintaining the ‘public good’ of a healthy and life-enhancing environment.

**Sustainability and Public Discourse**

Sustainability is not simply a technical matter about implementing policies and practices that do not, from a human-prudential point of view, upset the ecological conditions of life and its flourishing. It is, I suggest, a moral concept because it explicitly refers to our relationship to future and present generations, and indi-
rectly to our interaction with the nonhuman world.3 ‘Sustainability’ itself must be discussed and interpreted, since by itself it is insufficiently precise to act as a social goal. That is, it is not self-grounding. There is a need for public deliberation where sustainability is concerned which, I argue, implies ‘public spheres’, and requires a notion of citizenship. In this way we can defend the concept of the green state from the charge that we are simply presenting a more acceptable argument for eco-authoritarianism. Although accepting the need for some degree of state regulation the argument here does not advocate the privileging of a survival principle which leads Ophuls, for example, to claim that ‘the golden age of individualism, liberty, and democracy is all over. In many important respects we shall be obliged to return to something resembling the pre-modern closed polity’ (1977: 145). However, unlike the original ‘limits to growth’ argument, upon which his argument is based, there is nothing inherent in the idea of sustainable development that warrants such a conclusion. The issues of political and civil leadership, authority and regulation he alludes to are important for green politics, but not in way he suggests. The democratic and judicial imperatives are together incompatible with the crude survivalist scenario. Authoritarian conceptions of green politics are rejected because the prioritisation of need-satisfaction may undermine the democratic or justice imperatives. The reason for this is quite simple: democracy is excess to the requirements of a objective/non-discursive conception of sustainability. A legitimate coercive body is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for its realisation.

Sustainability must involve the preservation of democratic norms and institutions as much as it means the conservation of a life-sustaining environment. But equally, the means by which a conception of sustainability becomes a social principle integrating economy and environment, must itself be democratic. That is, discursively decided. And although democratic practices are to be sustained, there are good reasons for thinking that traditional economic practices (and preferences) may have to change to accommodate this.

The maintenance of an economy-environment exchange not only preserves the natural resources which sustain life, but should also be understood as preserving the social and natural resources necessary for a distinctly ‘human’ life.4 In this sense it is ineliminably anthropocentric. Greens should not apologise for this. Indeed, it serves to show why a principled anthropocentrism is another necessary feature of green politics (Barry, 1993). The paradox of sustainability is that although greens are often understood as setting a high premium upon its achievement, it turns out that by itself its value is indeterminate. By itself as a social principle it is meaningless since it does not specify what is to be sustained. The positive value greens impart to it is, in part, derived from the positive value attached to that which is to be sustained. What gives normative force to sustainability is as the context within which democratic practices, just institutions and a shared way of life or culture, are preserved and passed on to descendents.

The indeterminacy of this ‘essentially discursive’ concept is further evidenced in that it is primarily moral and political, not scientific or metaphysical. It is not a given to be ‘discovered’ or ‘read off’ from nature, but a discursive, in-

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3On consequentialist grounds there is good strategic reason for those concerned with caring for nonhuman nature to express it in terms of concern for future human generations.
4The ‘environment’ to be sustained has both human/social and natural/ecological dimensions.
tersubjective creation, although the choice is limited by the nature of the world and ourselves. If with Barber we accept that ‘Politics is what men do when metaphysics fails’ (1984: 131), then sustainability is ineliminably a political issue. The need for the state is that such discursive ‘will-formation’ requires protected public spheres where such discussion can take place. As well as this input aspect, on the output side the state acts the agent of collective will. This traditional view of the state, as having the monopoly on legitimate coercion, and thus having the effective political power to enforce the collective will, is one greens can and must embrace. To deal with environmental public bads and goods, the state is necessary to assure obedience to the laws that sustainability will require. The other side of this is that people both consent, thus giving legitimacy to the state, and be willing to obey such ecological laws, for example, obligatory recycling. Along with the threat of negative sanction, greens also indicate the desirability of the state encouraging civic virtue in regard to citizens performing their duties and taking individual responsibility for the environment. This may indicate, as Weale notes, that:

‘When the state affirms the importance of individual responsibility for the protection of environment, it can be argued that it is doing more than simply seeking efficient and effective means to previously chosen ends, it is instead choosing ends ... The object of policy must not simply be a good environment, but good citizens in relation to that environment.’ (1992: 150).

As I argue in the next section, the focus for green politics should be on changing preferences the aggregative fulfilment of which results in collective bads, rather than seeking to change some allegedly environmentally-unfriendly form of consciousness (Barry, it op.cit, 45). Preference alteration can be facilitated via changing incentives facing individuals and, more importantly, through the interaction of people within discursive settings, which allows the possibility of normative persuasion in the light of argument and debate. Preferences and values are not, as some utilitarian-based theories hold, fixed and immutable. Greens would do well to explicitly accept and work out the various implications of seeing that ‘the central concern of politics should be the transformation of preferences rather than their aggregation’ (Elster, 1983: 35).

There is not a sustainable society, but only frameworks and principles within which the instantiation of green regulative principles is possible. Such framework-formation is a political task, one that cannot be effectively carried out without the state. But not any old state will do. What green political theory is concerned with is an ‘enabling’ or democratised state. The prime importance of democratisation in relation to the other imperatives is that abstract principles even when agreed upon, do not usually come with rules for their application. To apply abstract principles to concrete situations requires deliberation. And in this case of deciding an appropriate environment-economy exchange, that collective choice must be a democratic one, as I discuss below. The importance attached to democratic decision making for greens has to do both with the possibility of preference transformation within discursive practices and also the normative content that democratic procedures express. This moral aspect is stated by Redcliff:

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5There is no necessary reason why this democratic will-formation be direct or participatory, although greens would probably opt for these as opposed to representative forms. It is worth remembering that these are not mutually exclusive, but can be rendered compatible (Bobbio, 1987: 53).
‘Majority rule is the only legitimate form of decision-making (short of unanimity itself) in that it has a moral dimension. The decision reached by majority voting is binding not merely because it is an outcome we have all agreed to accept – for we could just as easily agree to accept the result from tossing fair coins – but because there is something special and unique about the sentiments of the majority. As members of a community (as opposed to atomistic egoists) we share certain bonds.’ (1992: 40)

In a sense the green attachment to democratic decision-making motivated to show that what unites citizens is prior and (sometimes) more important than what divides them. Although democracy is commonly thought of purely as a procedure, it does have a substantive collective as well as individual ethical core.

Democracy can be understood as that process whereby a collective discusses and decides principles and procedures that are to govern its common life, such as sustainability, and also agree on policies, forms of collective action, and social practices that realise, or at least embody, such democratically deliberated aims. From the green perspective, it also involves democratising spheres of social activity often left out of purview of democracy as usually understood. Such areas are the world of reproduction and the family which feminists have highlighted as essential elements of any critical discussion of present social arrangements. Allied with this is the equally difficult question of the ‘democratisation of welfare’, the extent to which aspects of people’s lives such as health-care, education, housing as well as work and leisure can be organised and regulated to enhance rather than diminish autonomy and choice (Keane, 1988: 25-7). What either of these imply is an issue outside the scope of this paper.

The democratic principle of allowing affected parties to have some say in decision-making that affects them, on the green interpretation, moves us in the direction of a wider understanding of political accountability. If democratic norms are to catch up with actual practices, those affected often include citizens of other states. An obvious example is transnational pollution, which can be viewed either in legal or legislative terms. The former as it is currently practiced involves examination of claims for damages by one legal person against another. The role of the state here is as advocate for its affected citizens. The most those affected can expect is compensation. The latter, democratic interpretation envisages the right of those likely to be affected to have some say in decision-making. In other words, an ex ante, pro-active, rather than ex post and reactive ‘solution’. One deals with the effects, the other the cause.

Allowing another state to have a legitimate input, or right of consultation, in an ostensibly domestic matter represents an erosion of sovereignty, but is often less costly than the continuing misperception that there is a sharp divide between do-

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6 Increasing autonomy in welfare provision is also an aim of free market libertarians, although they see the market rather than a more ‘enabling’ and responsive state as the appropriate mechanism. See Gray (1993) for a typical example, in which he attempts, unsuccessfully, to argue that greens are ‘really’ misguided conservatives.

7 An alternative interpretation is given by Held who claims that ‘The result [of globalization] has been a vast growth of institutions, organizations and regimes which have laid a basis for global governance’ (1991: 208).

8 For a fuller discussion of the state as advocate, see Goodin (1987).
mestic and foreign policy. For example, the effects of United Kingdom pollution affects both Ireland and Scandinavian countries, yet none are allowed any right of participation in the formulation of policy that may affect its citizens. In Dryzek’s terms, abstracting from such non-localised effects represents a classic instance of problem displacement being mistaken for problem solution (1987: 10-11). From the point of view of the ‘global commons’, displacing ecological problems either across space or time is ecologically irrational. Ecosystems do not respect political boundaries, yet this is the territory to which effective and lasting policy solutions need to be addressed. The existence of such transnational environmental problems begins to erode the notion of sovereignty, partly as a result of the effective erosion of territorial integrity and autonomy. Not only the world economy, but also the global economy of nature undermines the autonomy of nation-states. Mutual vulnerability and interdependence are the twin faces of ‘globalisation’.

While full participation of all those affected can never be assured, retention of the state allows for mediated extensive participation, that is, representation at the inter-state level. There is thus a close link between justice, or more correctly justification, and democratic participation. The green argument rests, I would argue, on the extension of consultation, at least, beyond nationally defined borders, because the relevant community is not always co-extensive with the nationally-delimited ‘demos’. We have no right, either as individuals or a collectivity, to ‘force’ (through our inaction) other people to pay or suffer for our particular lifestyles.

Environmental Citizenship

In seeing environmental degradation as a collective problem with individual and group causes, green political theory can employ the idea of citizenship both as a desirable activity and a motivational basis for carrying out sustainability programmes. What the idea of the green state and citizenship attempt to articulate are the environmental as well as social economic and political conditions under which citizens take collective decisions binding on all. One of the obvious candidates for evoking a sense of interdependency and how individual actions have collective consequences are environmentally related issues. Community has an ecological as well as a political dimension, the former in some ways intensifies the latter, and sometimes expands the relevant community of affected interests.

The conviction of sustainability as a collective issue may be understood as meaning that the preservation of a healthy environment is a question of the ‘common good’. In this way the state can be seen as provider of public goods, and a coordinator/enforcer for resolving public bads. Environmental dilemmas are such that the possibility of consensus is high, at least at the level of seeing them as problems for the collectivity. But to be effective this consensus must translate into effective and widespread consent. The uniqueness of environmental questions may be such that ‘in debate and dispute over public policies it may be possible for participants of different positions to agree on action without agreeing upon the reasons for that

\[9\] In other words, ex ante solutions are usually more pareto-optimal than ex post compensation.

\[10\] See Held (1991) for a discussion of other dimensions of ‘globalisation’.

\[11\] Here we can imagine the state representing the corporate will, by implementing a previously agreed mandate from citizens, a ‘sustainability charter’ or plan. One could regard it as part of an ‘ecological social contract’ between citizens and the state.
The aim of green theory is to shift the legitimacy of the state to its success in ‘managing the commons’, rather than, or in conjunction with the traditional ‘management of the economy’. This implies a degree of political leadership, and popular acceptance of civil authority.

A willingness on behalf of citizens not only to abide by laws, but to critically re-evaluate preferences will be necessary for green policies and social programmes to work. This is the central point of the discursive nature of sustainability. As Offe & Preuss note ‘What are needed for effective implementation of policies, in addition to legal regulation, are enlightened, principled and refined preferences on behalf of citizens’ (1991: 165). There must be an assumption of ‘public reasonableness’ to offset the idea that simply increasing the opportunities for participation will automatically enhance the ecological (or whatever) quality of collective decisions. A realistic starting point is that ‘We cannot simply argue that the more democracy the better’ (Tannjso, 1992: 2). Unreflective preferences and lifestyles do not automatically command respect, and are thus not beyond critical evaluation. The trick is for the state to create institutional structures to enable this to be discursively rather than authoritively implemented. It is the only body with the power, authority and legitimacy to enable or facilitate the democratisation of civil society. This implies the importance of civil society for educating preferences, fora for learning and debating. The general idea, then, is for the state to facilitate the move from self- to enlightened self-interest. One way of doing this is to submit preferences (not all, only those that directly impinge on others’ enjoyment and access to environmental goods and services) to rational justification. Individuals are obliged to give good reasons for their action, behaviour etc.

Citizens in a sense ought to be encouraged to both take part in the articulation of what sustainability means, as well as, for example, being obliged to pay taxes, needed for the fiscal and other measures involved in implementing it as specific policies. Here I think the green predilection for direct and participatory democracy needs to be critically examined. These forms of democracy as ways of voicing citizen preferences, assume either that all preferences are of equal value, which is doubtful, or in some Rousseauian manner can be thought to express the ‘general will’, which may have more merit, but cannot be discussed here. My main point is that representative forms of democracy have uses in filtering out unreasonable preferences. The discursive aspect of sustainability does not rule out different institutional structures of democratic discourse. The articulation of reasoned choices, as ‘inputs’, is not the exclusive preserve of direct democratic forms. One could also envisage a place for an ecological constitution, grounding citizens rights and obligations, as well as delimiting the scope of state action. The starting point for greens ought to be that ‘The social and political world within which we live is much more complex than the attitudes and value-judgements that it still lets us get away with’ (Offe & Preuss, op.cit, 169). Indeed, the ecological dimension makes it more complex, and citizens should be encouraged to adjust their behaviour to that reality. Part of the goal of the state on this account is to change the incentives facing citizens to engender ecologically rational choices, and to show that this is a collective good, something shared with others, and this

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12 This seems to hark back to Mill’s idea of the vote as a trust rather than a right, therefore something that demands public evaluation. However, this also led him to hold that ‘Universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement’ (Acton (ed), 1972: 303), something only authoritarian greens would be prepared to endorse.
‘other-regarding’ quality is an important aspect of being a good citizen from an environmental point of view.

Although some have criticised the ascription of blame for the environmental problems to an undifferentiated ‘humanity’ (Bookchin, 1991: 31) or ‘anthropocentrism’ (Hayward, 1992: 11), it is undoubtly the case that the interconnectedness of ecological problems implies that everyone, or a sufficiently large majority, must do their share to achieve a more harmonious ecology-economy interchange. To say that all must do their bit, is not the same as saying everyone must share the burden equally. Ecological problems have distributional causes, and their resolution will involve the distribution of benefits and especially burdens. In this sense an ecological conception of citizenship stresses the importance of duties and obligations as much as citizen rights. One of the greatest tasks facing the green position is to find compelling reasons for individuals, families, groups, associations to assume responsibility for both their immediate and the global environment. Act locally, think globally does have some resonance beyond a trite slogan, if we realise that the question is about overlapping ‘environments’ and the mutual vulnerability of citizens to each other’s actions. The idea of ‘environmental citizenship’ is a way of reminding us that we are not just members of a particular society, but part of a wider ecologically defined human community.\textsuperscript{13}

A practical example domestically would be ‘environmental national service’, or more contentiously attaching environmental considerations to ‘workfare’ programmes. The dependency, apathy, and passivity of citizens in contemporary democracies are obstacles facing the resolution of environmental problems, made more imperative if we accept that neither government nor the market nor community can do everything that will be necessary. The environmental crisis offering a ready-made common purpose around which citizenship may be invigorated, and given practical as well as formal political expression. Citizenship is not just a purely ‘political’ activity, but manifests itself in having a particular attitude and living one’s life according to that attitude. The place, therefore, of ‘civic virtue’ in green political theory needs to be more fully worked out so as to put more flesh on the concept of environmental citizenship. The motivation on behalf of citizens to do what is required cannot be taken for granted.\textsuperscript{14}

The idea of giving every citizen a guaranteed basic income, despite its many problems, must be understood within the context of the importance attached to citizenship. Basic income attempts to give citizens the opportunity to drop out of the formal economy (but still obligated to do their bit for the environment), allowing them the time (if not the money) to become politically active. It gives some degree of material underpinning to equal citizenship, in a manner analogous to welfare state provisions. It is agnostic on the claim often assumed by participatory theorists that we are naturally political animals, that is, we realise ourselves as human beings in the active engagement and negotiation with fellow citizens.

\textsuperscript{13}Two radical extensions of this ‘expanding community’ logic would be the Marxist one of seeing the entire human species as my community, and the deep ecology idea of the global ‘community of life’ as the relevant collectivity (Fox, 1989).

\textsuperscript{14}The danger in all of this is that authoritarian outcomes will spring from ostensibly democratic procedures, and that the state will ‘force people to be ecological’. The other-regarding, public good aspect of this makes it qualitatively different from the problems of Rousseau’s ‘general will’, but nevertheless greens need to be sensitive to the dangers. An example of this is given by Oldfield who claims, from a strong civic republican position, that ‘The moral character which is appropriate for genuine citizenship does not generate itself: it has to be authoritatively inculcated’ (1990: 164).
The citizenship idea is to allow people the opportunity to participate in the governance of the community, but more importantly, to allow the possibility of more reflective preferences emerging in the discursive understanding of sustainability.

One of the motives behind the green ideal of guaranteeing every citizen a ‘social wage’ not connected to work, is the conviction that each member of society ought to have a minimum level of economic security that gives some substance to formal equality. The justification for this scheme is also in terms of basic necessities required for political citizenship. Those with unfulfilled basic necessities are alienated, not quite part of society. The notion of basic income is a fiscal measure to integrate the marginal as members of society. As such, those who propose it assume the continuing existence of the state. The provision of such measures is part of what I understand by an ‘enabling state’ (Keane, 1988). The danger, of course, is that there is no guarantee that citizens will conceive of their status in terms of a balance between duties and rights. For example, they may come to value the means to citizenship as ends in themselves, thus securing their private preferences or interests, which does not guarantee their reasonableness. The difficulty for the ecologically sensitive state is protecting citizens’ rights to certain environmental goods and services, but publicly demonstrating that as a corollary they share the burden in achieving and maintaining these. An enabling state, from a green point of view, is also an educative one.

Following Habermas (1992), green arguments for citizenship can be said to have a ‘postnationalist’ complexion, in two senses. The first has to do with the issue of rights to influence domestic legislation transcending the domestic electorate (example, the implementation of Agenda 21 from the Rio treaty by local authorities in the United Kingdom, or from the European Union). The second has to do with the idea of an ‘ecological social contract’ between citizens and the state (and suprastate bodies), where the allegiance of citizens is to constitutionally guaranteed rights as well as corresponding social obligations, rather than to the ‘nation’. The legitimacy of the state on this account is in terms of ‘environmental justice’, a just distribution of benefits and burdens, rather than in expressing or embodying the national identity of the ‘people’. The traditional political dimension to citizenship lies in the state ensuring duties are performed, that is, that there is a bond of political obligation rooted in consent, between citizen and state. An example of this is the tax raising power of the state, which will be needed to finance such policies as basic income schemes.

Conclusion: The Politics of Sustainability

The politics of sustainability is in many ways antithetical to the current (economic/scientific) understanding of sustainability. Green economics as it stands is an attempt to apply classical and neo-classical models to ecological questions, as if the relationship between society and environment were a matter of matching quantities and inputs to outputs (Pearce et al, 1989). This has its place in the debate about sustainability, but is not enough. Seeing ‘sustainability’ as an indeterminate, essentially discursive concept implies that it requires political articulation. The politics

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10 A third possible argument rests on the claim that the connection between citizenship and birth has now been broken. At least in principle, citizenship is a matter of choice.
of sustainability and sustainable development is about the circulation of discourses within public space. As a way of conceptualising and institutionising this, the network of reciprocal relations between state and citizen, and between the latter are, as I indicate, indispensible for green political theory. The indeterminacy of the problem may be located in the fact that it is both a question of practical judgement, ethics and knowledge. All of which make the problematique of sustainability an irreducibly political concern. Each of these aspects makes different demands and requires different qualities from citizens, ranging from a willingness to refine preferences, adopt less ecologically harmful lifestyles, defer to accountable expertise in matters of knowledge rather than judgement, and adopt the other-regarding attitude indispensible for the lasting provision of the ‘common good’.

In accepting the finitude of the earth we must not blind ourselves to the finitude of human abilities. The task facing the politics of sustainability is to blend these two insights together in a way that does not jeopardise the emancipatory potential inherent within Hegel’s dictum that ‘Freedom is the recognition of necessity’.

References


