

# **Emerging Green Values in the UK energy sector. Ecotricity as deep-green exemplar.**

## **By David McQueen and Amelia Turner**

### **Overview**

Sustainability has long been considered to be a key component of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Eweje and Bathurst 2017) and from 2015 became the explicit, guiding principle for the UN's landmark Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which foreground the transformative potential of the private sector (Scheyvens et al. 2016). These goals, and the bedrock tenet of sustainability, are likely to have increasingly urgent relevance for business as growing climate impacts raise the risks of crossing critical ecological tipping points (IPCC 2019). This chapter provides an in-depth case study of a 'deep-green' business, exploring the strong environmental and sustainable values of UK energy firm Ecotricity and its Director, founder and owner Dale Vince. We outline Ecotricity's growth to become one of the UK's largest green-energy providers and show how the company's success is built on a powerful commitment to sustainability and a set of interrelated, green 'activist' values which underpin every aspect of the company's decision-making.

Tracing the history of the company from the mid 1990s when it became the first to offer 'green electricity', the chapter outlines key moments in Ecotricity's expansion, its unique business model, reputation in the market, political lobbying efforts, marketing, communication and social media strategies, as well as the underpinning philosophy informing the growth of the business. The chapter considers Ecotricity's expansion and diversification from clean energy provider to offering a range of sustainable business initiatives including electric car charging stations, grid-scale battery storage, green mobile phone service, and vegan school food supplies. It also explores market rivals, regulatory and policy challenges and assesses the extent to which the director's single-minded and uncompromising values have helped secure a loyal, niche customer base. Dale Vince's particular brand of 'citizen entrepreneurship' (Bjerke et al. 2013) may offer a radical template for corporate environmental responsibility (CER) and business leadership as demand grows for green energy, services, products and governance. Vince's high-profile legal manoeuvres around Brexit are briefly considered as part of a highly proactive and interventionist campaigning style which keep him front and centre of a vigorous and politically-confrontational communication strategy.

The chapter concludes with a critical discussion of CSR in light of the threat of runaway global warming and the need for immediate and all-inclusive action by citizens, businesses and governments to encompass 'deep decarbonization' of the economy (IPCC 2019). This case study shows that sustainability can take centre stage at every level of business decision making and strategic planning and that the UN's call on all businesses 'to apply their creativity and innovation to solving sustainable development challenges' (UN 2015) can be met with sufficient will and determination.

### **The History of Ecotricity**

The Renewable Energy Company (now part of the Ecotricity Group) was founded in 1995 by Director Dale Vince, a former peace activist and new age traveller, originally from Great Yarmouth, Norfolk. Vince, a school drop out at 15, had been living off-grid for several years, including time at a camp at RAF Molesworth to protest against the basing of US cruise missiles there. His converted Air Force trailer (which served as home) was powered using a self-made wind turbine and he built small wind turbines to take to music festivals such as

Glastonbury before seeing a gap in the market for this kind of energy (Davidson 2009; Flintoff 2011). Ecotricity developed an 'embedded supply' model which uses the local grid to match customers to local generation and in 1996 it became the first company in the UK to offer 'green electricity' to a local college in the Gloucester area generated from landfill gas. As the company [website](#) states: 'Our mission was and remains to change the way electricity is made and used in Britain'. With help from a loan from Dutch ethical bank Triodos, Ecotricity was able to gradually expand its wind turbine capacity. In 1997, Vince attended the United Nations Convention for Climate Change in Kyoto, Japan, lobbying political and business leaders on the role wind energy could play in combating climate change. Early Ecotricity customers included The Millennium Dome, The Body Shop and Sainsbury's.

In the first few years Ecotricity focused on providing power for businesses, but in 2002, with capacity growing, the company began supplying to 3,000 domestic properties rising to 8,000 in 2004 and 23,000 by 2006. An 85 metre windmill, the first in the south-east of England, was constructed in 2005 by Ecotricity to supply energy to Green Park Business Park close to junction 11 of the M4. The location meant the turbine became 'possibly the most visible turbine in the world' seen by large numbers of people who had never seen a wind turbine before and, the company argued, this helped to counter rising 'anti-wind scaremongering' (Ecotricity 2017). Ecotricity subsequently became the first company to supply wind-generated electricity to offices in the area, helping Reading Council reduce their CO2 emissions. In 2007 they opened three new turbines supplying half the power used by the Bristol Port Company at Avonmouth Docks.

By 2008 Ecotricity had installed 51 turbines across the UK and invested £750,000 working with Formula 1 engineers on the first British-built road-going electric supercar, called 'The Nemesis'. In 2009 Ecotricity's engineless 'Greenbird' broke the land speed record for a wind-powered vehicle clocking a speed of 121 mph. Alongside Ecotricity's electric motorbike 'Ion Horse' (with a top speed of 150mph) these developments represented, in the company's words, an effort to challenge negative perceptions of electric vehicles and address one of three 'really big issues we have to face up to, to live post oil – how we power our homes, travel and feed ourselves' (PR Week 2013; Ecotricity 2019b).

Despite the 2008-9 recession and difficult lending environment Ecotricity continued to grow, adding B&Q in 2009 to the list of 'green chip clients' companies by powering their distribution centre near Worksop with Nottinghamshire's first large-scale wind turbine (Merchant Wind Power 2010). In 2010 Ecotricity diversified by offering a 'Green Gas tariff', making them the first energy company to offer 'bio-gas' made from eco-friendly 'composted' organic waste (Ecotricity 2010). They floated two oversubscribed rounds of 'ecobonds' which together raised £20 million (Edie 2016) and in 2011 also launched their 'Electric Highway' – the UK's first motorway network of charging points for electric vehicles. These were located at Welcome Break service stations enabling electric cars to travel between London, Bristol, Exeter, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and north to the Lake District without running out of power. By 2019 the Electric Highway had 300 chargers for its 50,000 members across 'almost every motorway service station area' in the UK' at a cost of £20m (Campbell 2019).

Ecotricity's social media strategy has helped the company keep in contact with customers and reach out to potential new customers with innovative campaigns that have, amongst other things, aggressively tackled other energy providers for their continued dependence on fossil fuels. For example, in 2012 Ecotricity released a 'Dump the Big Six' viral video, created by Man+Hatchet advertising agency, showing collapsing cooling stacks animated with comical faces which, by 2019, had been seen over 7 million times on YouTube. The video humorously associated the 'Big Six' with polluting and redundant coal-fired energy generation in contrast to the promise of a clean energy future with Ecotricity.

In 2013 Ecotricity launched a 100% green electricity tariff for all customers and made a frack-free commitment to its customers promising not to 'source any of our gas from shale', and 'never invest in fracking'. In 2019 the company claimed to offer 'vegan energy' to over 200,000 customers across Britain, meaning that no animals or animal by-products are involved in the production of its electricity and gas (*The Ecologist* 2019, *Which* 2019). The company's [Progress Report](#) for 2019 boldly took up Extinction Rebellion's target to become carbon neutral:

'We've become the first business in the world to declare a 'climate emergency' – adopting XR's target of 2025 to become carbon neutral. Carbon zero has been our long-held ambition – and now we've put a date on it.'

Identifying the company's corporate goals with that of direct-action climate activists is the most recent indication of the company's radical, deep-green values.

### **The UK Energy Market and Renewables Sector**

The backdrop to Ecotricity's steady, if modest, growth has been the dramatic increase of renewable capacity in the UK, which tripled in the five years to 2018 to overtake fossil fuels for short periods in 2018-19. According to research by Dr Iain Staffell of Imperial College London, electricity generation is decarbonising faster in Britain than anywhere else in the world. However, claims that 'Britain's power system is closer than ever to being fossil-free' (Staffell 2019) made, somewhat ironically, on the Drax website seem over-optimistic, at best. Available figures show huge fluctuations over time, with fossil fuels making up over 40% (*Which* 2019) and non-renewable (including nuclear) accounting for around 60% of all supplies in the year to October 2019 (Drax Electric Insights 2019). The need to assess industry-sponsored research with a sceptical eye should mean we treat any selective use of statistics, or stories around the imminent demise of fossil fuels with caution.

In fact, the UK energy market is still dominated by power stations, such as those run by Drax, and energy suppliers which draw very heavily on non-renewable sources as part of a national energy mix. Energy regulator Ofgem (2019) describes the energy market as being composed of the six largest (British Gas, SSE, nPower, EDF energy, Scottish Power, Eon), seven medium (OVO, Bulb, Shell Energy, Utilita, Utility Warehouse, Octopus Energy, Green Star Energy) and a selection of twelve small suppliers (Ecotricity, Better Energy, Breeze Energy, Bristol Energy, Engie, Good Energy, Green Energy, iSupply, PFP, Robin Hood, Tonik and Zog Energy). Of these only three: Ecotricity, Good Energy and Green Energy UK were given permission in 2019 to charge consumers above the standard variable tariff rates limit set by Ofgem due to their active support for renewable generation. Many energy suppliers claiming to be supplying 'green energy' do so based solely on the purchase of Renewable Energy Guarantee of Origin (REGO) certificates, which can cost as little as £1.55 per year per customer to purchase. According to *Which* companies such as Green Star Energy, Ovo Energy, Pure Planet, Robin Hood Energy, So Energy, Tonik Energy and Yorkshire Energy all sell 100% renewable tariffs solely backed up by REGO certificates and did not generate renewable electricity themselves or have contracts to buy any renewable electricity directly from generators (*The Independent* 2019).

Good Energy is, arguably, Ecotricity's closest competitor and in 2017 Ecotricity built up a 25 per cent stake in the company and unsuccessfully attempted to install Dale Vince and Managing Director of one of Ecotricity's divisions, Simon Crowfoot, on the board of its rival . In 2019 Good Energy had 261,700 customers (Good Energy 2019), although a much smaller reach through social media platforms such as Facebook, where Ecotricity have tens of thousands more followers. Good Energy are founded on broadly similar values of care for the environment, although expressed in more 'moderate' and familiar, 'corporate' language:

'Our mission isn't just to provide gas and electricity to our customers; it's to create a structure to help everyone play their part in combating climate change by putting people at the heart of the solution.' (Good Energy, 2018).

While both pledge to combat climate change as a core goal, Good Energy is less diversified and more focused on the core business of energy, and unlike Ecotricity they do not run campaigns on veganism or wider environmental and political issues, for instance. Their Facebook page is less critical of government policy, and when critical it is expressed in more general and less party-political terms with a focus on the need for more urgent action in Westminster (Facebook, 2019). An example of this is a Good Energy post on the 29.04.2019 about the low turnout in the House of Commons for the debate on climate change.(Facebook, 2019).

With more than a dozen companies offering renewable energy tariffs in 2019, the market for renewable energy is growing but remains volatile, in some respects. A government price cap on the unit price of energy was introduced in January 2019 and other, more unwelcome, policy reforms took effect which impacted the renewable energy market. Solarplicity, an energy provider that sourced 100% of its energy from renewables (*Which* 2019) and which also installed and maintained rooftop solar PV, became the 13th small energy firm to collapse in 2018-19. This was blamed, in part, on a highly competitive and overcrowded market in which 'high levels of competition, cost volatility and policy uncertainty' (IGov 2019, p.2) resulted in many suppliers leaving the market, or going bankrupt. One element of policy uncertainty was the government's decision to close the solar feed-in tariff scheme (FITs) to new applications after 31st March 2019 without any immediate replacement. This meant those installing new solar panels might not be paid at all for providing electricity to the grid. The resulting uncertainty around a replacement for FITs, in addition to previous cuts in government subsidies for renewables and an effective ban on onshore wind turbines, further damaged market confidence and contributed to ongoing instability and job losses in the renewable energy sector. It is against this somewhat turbulent backdrop that Ecotricity enters the 2020s.

### **Ecotricity's company structure, business model and growth**

Ecotricity is a not-for-dividend, limited company group with a fairly unique business model. Dale Vince as founder Director is the sole owner of Ecotricity, making him ultimately responsible for decisions about the group (Ecotricity, 2019) although day-to-day management is through a team of directors with corporate business backgrounds. While there are no shareholders, the public can invest in Ecobonds which had raised £53 million for the company by 2016 (*The Telegraph*, 2016). The company headquarters is based in Stroud, Gloucestershire where they are one of the biggest employers in the county, with 'more than 800 employees nationwide', according to media reports (*Gloucestershire Live* 2018), although Ecotricity's own [Environmental Footprint Report](#) (2018) puts the number of employees at 644. Discrepancies in the reported number of employees may be due to the complex nature of the Ecotricity Group which covers over seventy different companies registered with Companies House as outlined in [Ecotricity Group's Tax Strategy Statement](#) (2019) which states that the group does 'not promote tax avoidance or aggressive tax planning arrangements'.

Sustainability and fairness are two consistently cited values of Ecotricity which are reflected at different levels in the company. As part of their business model they have a 'bills for mills' initiative which means that much of the money (over 80% in 2012) made from gas and electricity goes directly back into reinvesting and innovating the production of electricity

(Facebook, 2019). This may be through [hybrid renewable energy parks](#) (Ecotricity Wind and Sun Parks Ltd), energy storage, green gas production or through the manufacture of electric motors, generators and transformers ([Britwind](#)). Ecotricity have similar system to 'bring the bee back to Britain' with their mobile phone service, called [Ecotalks](#) (Ecotalks, 2019). The money from phone bills is used to buy up land and return these sites to their natural state to improve habitat for bees. All Ecotricity customers are on the same energy tariff no matter what type of payment, which might be seen as more 'fair', helping reduce fuel poverty that affects over two and a half million people in the UK (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy 2019). However, according to *Which*, 'the tariff is far from the cheapest', although the comparison website noted that Ecotricity came 'a respectable joint-eighth out of 30 energy companies' and that its customers seem to 'feel happier to pay a little more for a green-focused tariff' (*Which* 2019).

Since 1995 (when they built their first windmill) Ecotricity has grown in capacity and number of customers with a strong expansion between 2009-2017. The number of customers currently stands at approximately 200,000 (Ecotricity 2019a) with hundreds of staff at their Stroud headquarters, although an unspecified number were laid off in 2018 following a restructuring process (Stroud News and Journal 2018). This follows a 'shocking' £23m loss in 2017, which Vince took 'ultimate responsibility for' and which he attributed to 'accounting errors relating to unbilled amounts in the main', noting that the company had employed a new finance director to help turn things around (Gloucestershire Live 2018). The company, which may have overstretched itself in 2017, went back into profit in 2018.

Ecotricity's customer base makes them one of the bigger green energy companies and while they remain small compared with giants such as British Gas, EDF, SSE or E.ON, the market dominance once enjoyed by the 'Big Six' has seen a marked decline since 2011 with small suppliers now making up 8% of electricity supplied in the UK in 2019 (Ofgem 2019a).

### **Customer care and critics**

The consumer review magazine *Which* gives Ecotricity four out of five and comments on their green values:

"It beat all of the 'Big Six' energy companies and Ecotricity's 70% customer score was nine percentage points higher than the overall average for energy companies in England, Scotland and Wales." (*Which*, 2019).

The highest area they score in is the online customer care which scored 5/5. However, this does not mean the company is without critics. On the customer review website Trustpilot 52% of customers describe the service as 'excellent', but 28% of the reviews are 'bad'. The positive reviews describe a friendly, quick service and good value compared to some of the 'Big Six' providers, for instance, but negative reviews tend to focus on persistent problems with switching accounts, poor customer service and unexpectedly high bills. On the Trustpilot site a representative of Ecotricity has politely replied to almost all the reviews or complaints offering to help with or look into problems that have been described, suggesting the company values good customer experience and makes an effort to redress complaints, especially when aired publicly. This appears to be a more typical response for the smaller energy firms for whom positive reviews are likely to be more important. By contrast, five of the Big Six had between 76% and 95% 'bad reviews' with far lower level of direct replies to customers on Trustpilot from these energy suppliers. Of course, it is possible that the site is being used by unhappy customers as a venue to air grievances and these highly negative reviews may not be representative of the experiences of most customers at any of the energy suppliers.

There have also been criticisms of Ecotricity's Electric Highway. Being first mover into the market for charging stations meant that Ecotricity maintained something of a monopoly, initially. According to *The Financial Times*, many of the more recent charging point operators still struggle to break into the motorway segment because of terms in Electric Highway's contracts with service station groups, lack of interoperability and fragmented system of apps and payment cards. These operators have been critical of Ecotricity for the slow pace of investment and aging technology. Responding to the criticism, Vince pointed to the upgrading of the network in 2019 which would ensure that '99 percent' of Ecotricity's network was working at any one time. He noted that the Electric Highway had never made a penny in profit: 'We're not about profitability [...] we genuinely did this because we wanted to kick start something,' adding that such complaints are the sour grapes of latecomers. 'We welcome honest competition,' he said. 'Obviously our competitors will attack us. That's just capitalism in action' (Campbell 2019).

Other complaints on local news website relate to investing in the 'vegan vanity project' football club Forest Green Rovers or the plans to 'concrete over' green fields to build an eco business and leisure park, revised after refusal of planning permission as a football stadium only. In a comment section below news of redundancies at Ecotricity one member of the public queried the environmental and business case for the proposed Eco Park stadium at a time when the company was laying off workers:

'They claim to be ethical too, and there's nothing ethical around using loopholes in employment law to save you money when eradicating over 10% of their staff with no prior warning or consultation' (Gloucestershire Live 2018).

### **Flag controversy**

Other complaints relate to Dale Vince's various political campaigns. On 14th April 2019 a huge 10 metre EU flag was flown from the front of the Ecotricity headquarters in Stroud in celebration at the delay of Brexit. This was described in a Facebook post as a cheeky 'up yours' to hard Brexiteers like Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and David Davis (Stroud News and Journal 2019). A petition organised by a local teenager Lee Sibley against the flag raised 1,240 signatures and the Brexit supporting *Daily Express* reported 'outrage' that the local Council had failed to remove the flag, although no laws were broken. Mr Sibley was reported as saying:

'This flag is offending many people, including veterans who have signed the petition. [...] It's absolutely disgusting as it's also an eyesore, not forgetting health and safety as well.' (Daily Express 2019)

More recent political and legal activity by Dale Vince are considered in the final section of this chapter.

### **Media, Communications and Values**

Ecotricity has an extensive website, comprising 1,270 registered web pages on Google with a well-designed and easily-navigable interface. It has a news section and a business section which includes information about how to get a quote, the different tariffs and services available as well as a section focusing on the company's values. Ecotricity makes extensive use of social media platforms, including Facebook (73K+ followers), Twitter (32K+ followers) and Instagram (9K+ followers), some aspects of which are managed by a company called Falcon Management. They also have a regularly-updated Youtube channel (11K+ followers) with videos that cover environmentally-related topics such as energy, transport, food and nature. The company has been able to draw on the creative resources required to produce

over two hundred carefully-crafted videos on themes such as energy, transport, food and nature, reflecting Ecotricity's deep-green values. Alongside but sometimes separately from these communications Vince makes extensive use of Facebook (9K+ followers) and Twitter (15K+ followers), in particular, to publicise numerous ventures and discuss a range of issues from Forest Green Rovers to his joint legal interventions around Brexit. In 2019 a new podcast 'Zercarbonista' was added to the suite of communication channels and dozens of media interviews Ecotricity's Director was contributing to, as the urgency of the climate crisis gained greater news coverage against a backdrop of global protests.

Value patterns communicated on social media by Ecotricity have been consistent since the company's first Facebook posting in June, 2009, reflecting the company's deep-green ethos and Dale Vince's vision for a green economy. Ecotricity's public communications stress that environmental and communal responsibility comes first, in contrast to more profit-driven competitors such as British Gas or NPower. Few of their posts appear overtly aimed at recruiting new customers and there is, in fact, a huge range of issues covered in the posts ranging from fracking and government energy policy to company-led initiatives around electric car charging points, to land bought and set aside for wild flowers and bees. Major issues covered between 2009 and 2019 on Facebook, for instance, include fracking, associations/friends of Ecotricity, government energy policy, veganism and wildlife conservation.

Ecotricity's communications often contain a sense of urgency drawing on phrases such as 'climate crisis' rather than 'climate change' to emphasise the importance of urgent action, although this mirrors a wider shift in public discourse towards the use of terms like 'climate emergency'. This has happened particularly, as *The Guardian's* environment editor notes (in marking the change to that newspaper's house style guide), since May 2019 when Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, who inspired school strikes for climate around the globe, argued:

'Can we all now call it what it is: climate breakdown, climate crisis, climate emergency, ecological breakdown, ecological crisis and ecological emergency?' (cited Carrington 2019).

Although Ecotricity's online communications contain few obvious direct bids for new customers there is a sense of joining the fight against climate breakdown with the company, rather than being complicit in the damage being done by other energy providers. This message of an urgent need to 'join the fight' is neatly summed up in the image of Dale Vince in a First World War Lord Kitchener recruiting pose, pointing at the reader of Ecotricity's [2019 Progress Report](#) against the company's green and white Union Jack logo above the strapline 'Green Britain needs YOU'. The headline for the short, online report is simply, '12 Years to Save the Planet'.

Ecotricity's Facebook and Twitter feeds are usually updated on a daily basis, sometimes several times a day. On some occasions the company has posted over a dozen times, for instance, on 2/07/2019 when they posted 11 times about WOMAD. This included pictures, videos and tweets about updates and information on their involvement with the event.

The focus of Ecotricity posts range over a number of themes that sometimes reflect political developments in the UK and beyond. For example, there were a flurry of posts on fracking in 2018 when there was relatively heavy media coverage and social media discourse around the issue, especially related to protests against drilling in parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Some of the posts have an anti-establishment tenor, such as a post on 15/09/2017 about protesting: "...the fracking giants in government and industry." This not only illustrates a value of environmentalism but also unchanging and uncompromising values, even in the

face of a determined and well-funded energy sector with (at that time) full government support.

Criticism of government policy is not limited to social media posts. In a news feature on the Ecotricity website posted in 2015, Dale Vince complains:

'[...] the government has rigged the market in favour of fossil fuels. That's why we're calling on the Conservatives to level the playing field for energy generation in Britain – to remove the subsidies for fossil fuels just as they have done for wind and solar power. Those stealth fossil fuel subsidies add up to £1000 a year for each household; compare that to just £100 a year for renewable energy, which now provides 25% of Britain's electricity – that's £100 well spent and a big part of the reason why we're so confident that with a level playing field renewable energy would thrive.'

Such direct criticism of national government policy is unusual in the corporate world and reflects the campaigning style which characterises much of Dale Vince's communications.

Although they don't get as many interactions, self-education and the personal changes people can make to have a greener lifestyle is also a consistent theme in Ecotricity's communications. Examples include support for and partnership with the organisation [Green Tourism](#), or advice about recycling plastic by using '[eco bricks](#)'. The benefits of a vegan diet is also a recurring issue, such as [vegan sausage roll recipes](#) or information about supplying vegan food to schools

This reinforces their value system that fundamental attitude change in society is needed if we are going to save the planet. Veganism and more sustainable food, transport and energy on a personal and policy level are part of their vision for 2030.

Ecotricity's Instagram posts have seen the most evolution since their first post in November, 2014. In 2014 the posts were mostly about nature and not apparently directly related to promoting the company or its causes. Over time their posts have become more branded and tightly focused. Firstly, on raising awareness about changes people can make in their homes and the importance of reducing carbon emissions. One way they do this is by publishing infographics, such as a post from 30/11/2017 on the many benefits of urban trees. Then there is emphasis on the need for political action with a substantial number of posts calling for policy change. There is support for policies that may affect public behaviour such as a 'cow tax' (tax on meat farming), or which are legally binding such as carbon limits on corporations. All have a critical tone with some militant rhetoric, for example, 'system change not climate change' (2019, Instagram).

Looking at values in social media posts, mentions of fairness and equality appear frequently throughout their social media discourse and are projected as intrinsic to their billing system. The language used reflects a sense of care for their customers which, surveys show, is often found wanting in bigger corporate companies:

'At Ecotricity, all of our customers pay the same so they can choose the payment method that works for them and not feel that they are losing out as a result. We feel that's a much fairer system and it's one that works for us and our customers.'  
(Facebook, 2014).

There is a sense of the importance of good customer care and this is also evident in Vince's frequent criticism of monopolies that overcharge customers.



The overarching goals and values of Ecotricity's communications reveal an underlying belief in the need for profound social, economic and institutional change. They try and achieve this by promoting key issues such as the need to act on the climate crisis, to promote wildlife conservation, to champion carbon neutral technologies and strategies and to impact future government policy. The key issues occur persistently throughout their social media campaigns and are intrinsic to the company itself, indicating that Ecotricity sees itself as more than just a green energy company, but positions itself as a radical organisation with revolutionary, 'deep-green' values.

The posts, as a whole, cover a wide range of demographics, yet, it is reasonably clear who they are targeting in each individual post - often quite specific groups, such as vegetarians and vegans, or businesses that want to go green. This reflects the value of changing all of society as a whole, even though some of their posts support more marginal or countercultural lifestyles (such as veganism). A major theme is inclusive change, that people need to come together for the better. There is a sense of almost incidental advertising for Ecotricity, amidst the campaigning and educational material, or links to other organisations.

### **Partnerships**

Previous research on CSR partnerships suggests mutually beneficial partnerships between corporations and non-profit organisations, civil society and various governmental organisations can often be successful (Albareda et al. 2007). Nevertheless, there are often significant issues aligning business interests which are rooted in profit and economic growth and NGOs and charitable sectors, in particular, where sustainability, workers and community rights or ethical values take priority (Wadham 2009; Bingham et al. 2013). Such issues of alignment do not, generally, appear to hinder Ecotricity's various partnerships.

One way in which Ecotricity reaches new customers and raises awareness of its green business is through strategic sponsorship. This ranges from financial support for Forest Green Rovers, described by FIFA as 'the world's greenest football club' to collaborations with charities, campaign groups and wildlife conservation organisations. Over 140 organisations Ecotricity works with or provides power to are listed on their partner page, including eight conservation trusts, six vegan groups, six animal rights organisations, four transition towns, various pressure groups such as CND, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the festival WOMAD and several ethical consumer groups or progressive magazines, such as *Red Pepper* and *Juno*. These partnerships offer an opportunity for people belonging to other ethical, progressive or environmentally-focused organisations to learn about Ecotricity's vision of a 'Green Britain' and potentially become a customer, sometimes with incentive offers of cash donations to the partner organisation. As Burton et al. (2017) have noted, such sponsorship and cause-related marketing can be transactional and simply oriented towards building brand awareness. However, the degree to which Ecotricity under Dale Vince has become involved with some of these partners suggests a more long-term commitment above and beyond the financial bottom line, particularly where sustainability objectives of each party clearly align.

An example of such commitment would be Forest Green Rovers FC (FGR), of which Vince is Chairman and owner. FGR has received frequent coverage and publicity through Ecotricity's website and social media coverage since 2010 when club ran into financial difficulties and Ecotricity became involved. Under Vince's stewardship FGR set themselves the task of becoming 'the most sustainable football club in Britain, probably the world' including a pesticide and chemical-free pitch, solar panels, ultra-low energy LED floodlights, recycled rainwater irrigation system, electric carpool, bamboo kit and vegan food for players, staff and fans (Sustainability in Sport nd; FGR 2019). Ownership of FGR has proved an

effective way to raise awareness of sustainability values and provides marketing and campaigning synergies for Ecotricity with widespread media coverage and publicity, especially locally where coverage of football games is a regular feature of the news.

Amongst Ecotricity's closest partnerships, the three most mentioned on their social media and news article history are, the RSPB, the Vegan Society and Sea Shepherd. On social media Ecotricity have shared content from these organisations, mentioned them in posts and named them as partners of the month. They also appear in news articles on Ecotricity's website and these organisations also share stories and links back to the company. The RSPB, for instance, have a page explaining who their partners are and a search on RSPB website for 'Ecotricity' reveals five articles, although Ecotricity are mentioned more on the RSPB Facebook page, such as this comment on the 29th March:

'Our RSPB members have helped to save 10,000 tonnes of Co2 by switching to green energy and we want to say a big thank you!' (Facebook, 2019).

The link with RSBP, a well-established and non-controversial institution, was strengthened when in 2016 Ecotricity built a windmill supplying electricity to their Headquarters in Sandy, Bedfordshire. This close association with RSPB helps give Ecotricity a sense of being trustworthy and embedded in mainstream values and causes whilst helping to debunk some of the myths around the impact of windfarms on birdlife. Having RSPB endorse Ecotricity acts as a counter argument to a recurring criticism of wind turbines and increases the appeal to middle England.

Out of the three, the Vegan Society carries the most content and articles about Ecotricity, all positive, including a description of the company as 'the world's only official vegan energy supplier' (Vegan Society, 2016). Sea Shepherd has the least online content relating to their partner and sponsor (Dale Vince is an Honorary Patron of Sea Shepherd). Of all Ecotricity's partners, Sea Shepherd could be considered the most controversial as they employ direct action tactics, such as ramming ships and removing fishing gear. Sea Shepherd's more single-minded focus on direct-action tactics to confront illegal activities and protect wildlife in the world's oceans is, perhaps, indicative of a more militant dimension to Vince's environmental values. It is these strongly-held values which has spurred him to invest in numerous conservation initiatives alongside the core green-energy supply business and take on a more public, interventionist and explicitly political campaigning role than most CEOs would be comfortable with.

### **Party Political Support**

Lobbying and funding of political parties has long been a concern for critical research into the disproportionate influence of corporations over government policy and law-making process in the U.S. (Drutman 2015), the UK (Miller and Dinan 2008; Cave and Rowell 2014) and across the globe (Beder 2006, 2019; McMenamin 2013). Bauer (2014) has drawn on CSR and lobbying research to develop a normative model of 'responsible lobbying' incorporating stakeholders' and broader society's interests within a transparent and democratic process. Her paper points to problems of transparency and accountability and that symmetric two-way-communication with stakeholders may be desirable, but that 'moving policy issues to the open public sphere is not always possible' (p.68).

From a sustainability perspective Ecotricity can be shown to be carrying out 'responsible lobbying' by pushing the major parties for greater support for renewable energy and to end subsidies and tax relief for the fossil fuel sector. There is a degree of transparency in the funding of political parties, partly due to British laws regarding disclosure of party funding. It is through Ecotricity's funding of three parties that Dale Vince was subject to negative

commentary about financial backing for the Labour Party, in particular, who supported government subsidies for the renewable sector (see [The Telegraph 2015](#); [The Independent 2015](#)). The issue of transparency and democratic accountability of Vince's lobbying efforts is more difficult to assess given lack of shareholder oversight and that, as Bauer (2014) has pointed out, policy discussion between corporations and political decision makers usually takes place behind closed doors.

Ecotricity's funding of and 'ethical partnerships' with UK political parties, as with its other charity and organisational partnerships also appears to have a tactical and marketing role (access to potential new customers), alongside an influence and lobbying rationale. Promotional deals with the [Green Party](#) and [Liberal Democrats](#) mean that when someone signs up to Ecotricity they donate £50 to these parties. **I**

While Ecotricity has been critical of the Conservative and Conservative-Lib Dem coalition governments, there are indications that they align themselves with particular Labour, Green Party and Liberal Democrat policies. There have been various posts supportive of Labour proposals, such as a post in March, 2019 when they posted a picture supporting Labour's zero carbon housing standards. They have also mentioned joint events with the Green Party such as at WOMAD Q&A and a link to the Green Party from Ecotricity's [partner page](#) states:

'We both agree that Britain needs to ditch fracking and choose green energy, for any hope of a sustainable future. We need a world where we can take real care of our planet, our wildlife, and our people. And together, Britain's greenest energy company and the greenest political party can help deliver that'.

In fact, Ecotricity have made donations to Labour, the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats as all three parties support subsidies for renewables. In November, 2013 they donated £20,000 to the Green Party and £250,000 to the Labour Party in 2015 to help prevent, 'an existential threat from a second-term Tory government' (Guardian, 2015). In an article in *The Guardian* Dale Vince explained how he felt let down by the coalition:

'We've watched the coalition government systematically undermine not just the renewable energy industry in Britain but the whole green economy and, by default, efforts to combat climate change'.

Records at The [Electoral Commission](#) show the Liberal Democrats received £50,000 in 2015 from Ecotricity, of which £20,000 was to the party in Kingston upon Thames constituency which Ed Davey, pro-renewables Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, had lost. This shows a strong tactical dimension to these donations, which include a further £20,000 to the Lib Dems in 2016 and tens of thousands of pounds donated regularly to The Labour Party between 2014-18, but none to the Green Party since 2013. These donations have led to hostile coverage in the press. A critical report in [The Telegraph](#) in 2015 noted that Dale Vince had received a £3.2m loan from his own company and described the revelation 'as potentially embarrassing for Mr Miliband'.

### **Mutual Three-Way Party Support for Ecotricity**

Dale Vince's support over time for three political parties has paid some dividends, at least in terms of endorsement for Ecotricity. On the Liberal Democrats website, for instance, there is a section that talks about the partnership:

'Our partnership with Ecotricity is about hitting our climate targets, it's about building more green energy, and it's about changing the way energy is made and used in Britain.' (Lib Dems, 2017).

The content is positively framed, explaining what the company does and why the Lib Dems see it as a good cause. There are similar messages from the Green Party, with positive support on their social media encouraging members of the public to switch to Ecotricity. The Labour Party have also positively endorsed Ecotricity and Dale Vince who they invited to speak on the theme of a Green New Deal and Renewable Energy at various Labour Party events in 2019. Through his Twitter feed and Facebook posts Vince has shown very strong support for Labour's Declaration for a Green Industrial Revolution as well as fierce opposition to Brexit and the Conservative Party under the leadership of Boris Johnson, in particular. The degree of alignment in Labour Party and Dale Vince's is an example of what Burton et al (2017) describe as 'co-branded tweets' which enable the joint promotion of the cause and help engage customers in awareness of the issues and developing mutual support for both partners.

### **Brexit Legal Challenge**

On the question of Brexit, Dale Vince made national headlines in 2019 for funding a legal challenge in the Court of Session in Edinburgh to consider if Boris Johnson could be imprisoned if he defied the so-called Benn Act passed in Parliament in September and pursued a 'no-deal' Brexit. Vince, described in many of the media headlines as a 'multimillionaire environmentalist', said:

'That we can anticipate law-breaking by our prime minister is incredible,[...] There is a remedy to that through the courts, which is an injunction to prevent that law-breaking from taking place' (Al Jazeera 2019).

Prime Minister Johnson subsequently sent a photocopy of an unsigned letter to Brussels asking the EU for a Brexit delay after his deal was not approved in Parliament. He also sent another accompanying letter saying he did not support an extension which appeared designed to frustrate the Benn Act. The EU responded to the letters by accepting the initial request for an extension. On the 21st October judges at Scotland's highest civil court maintained pressure on Boris Johnson by delaying their ruling - this time until the "obligations under the 2019 Act have been complied with in full" (*The i* 2019; *The Financial Times* 2019). A running commentary on the progress of this successful legal challenge could be followed through Dale Vince's Twitter and Facebook posts. A sense of mischievous pleasure could be detected in several of these posts which celebrating blocking the will of the Prime Minister, for whom it is very clear Dale Vince has no respect. This tweet from the 12th September was somewhat typical:

Dale Vince @DaleVince

'Our legal action is a sign of the times perhaps, I'm an ex hippie traveller who has to take an old Etonian PM to court to ensure he abides by the law'.

This could be added to many other mocking posts which showed Boris Johnson as a [dodgy car salesman](#), or as a [bull](#) being led by the nose by a Scottish judge. A photo on his Twitter feed of a smiling Dale Vince pointing approvingly at a [poster](#) on the Global Climate Strike march of 20th September 2019 proclaimed 'F\*\*K Boris (a confrontational post that remains on Vince's feed despite overwhelmingly negative comments). These examples all stray very far from the norms of CSR communications and show Ecotricity's founder and director as a take-no-prisoners environmental and political activist as much as a business leader. For more than twenty years, somewhat remarkably, he has successfully managed to combine the two.

### **Summary of values**

The deep-green value system of Ecotricity has been a constant through their public communications over the past two decades. Their Facebook and social media communications imply that the company is, first and foremost, for environmental sustainability through a concern with developing a green, de-carbonised economy. Explicit values include the need for a clean energy revolution in Britain; sustainability; economic and environmental improvement and fairness. Implicit values include a critique of neoliberalism and Thatcherite free market values which form a common thread within the company's communications. In a video on Youtube, Vince expresses concern at the impacts and uncontrolled force of capitalism:

“...capitalism has become a force of evil... it's above all else, isn't it? Above people, above the planet...” (Vince, 2019).

These are unusual sentiments from a 'multimillionaire' businessman, yet aligned with criticism of the 'free market' is a call for an end to state support for fossil fuels and greater intervention through government policies or directives in the fight against climate change. Holistic solutions which stress the need for action on a range of fronts by individuals, businesses and governments are also characteristic of Ecotricity's communications.

The value of and necessity for government intervention may be linked to a distrust in the motives of big business. There is a sense of disgust with the mess other corporations have made with fracking, plastic and farming for meat, for instance. Dale Vince's impatience with the government's support for the fossil fuel sector means that much of his online communications are very critical indeed of government policy. This example from a Facebook post on 19.07.2019:

“Our Alveston windpark in South Gloucestershire could be our last in England unless we see a change in government policy and they lift the ban on onshore wind.” (Facebook, 2019).

The urgent need for a clean energy revolution is one of the fundamental and consistent messages of Ecotricity. It is within their DNA and outlined clearly in their 2030 vision report (Ecotricity's [2030 Vision for a Green Britain](#), 2015). The report argues that Britain's power must go through:

“A revolution that spreads all the way down from the Big Six to British families”.

In statements made on their website and in reports there is support for a shift in policy to influence the public's behaviour. A good example of this would be the 'cow tax', in their 2030 vision. This was a tax Ecotricity has suggested bringing in to tax meat products with the hope that it will change public habits towards having a more vegan diet to reduce carbon (Ecotricity's 2030 vision for a Green Britain). Other policies include no VAT on electric cars, a Carbon Minister and so-called 'Quantitative Greening'. This suggests that Ecotricity believe that people won't change quickly enough and that corporations are not ethical enough to be left to free-market forces alone.

Dale's visit to [Downing Street](#) in July 2019 to work on EV charging was described as 'positive', although he did hint that the work done was token due to the short life span of Theresa May's government. He was pleased that houses will, in future, be built with charging points, but there is a sardonic tone that might be regarded as highly unusual for a company lobbying a sitting government.

“I nearly didn’t go, because I thought it might be a waste of a day but...” (Facebook, 2019).

This reflects the general attitude of Vince towards the Conservative government which is, often, critical, frustrated and mistrustful. In 2019 he appeared at Labour Party's "Rebuilding Britain" event in Stroud where he gave a speech about the climate crisis and the importance of change. This reflects the value of deep ecology and radical change that drives him and Ecotricity forward. The discourse isn't so much party political in its nature, although, the context of it being a Labour event makes it clear where he hopes a future government may be led from. Whether Vince is a loyal Labour supporter, or has simply thrown his weight behind the party which has the most realistic chance to make changes he believes are urgently needed is less important than the focus of his campaigning efforts. This remains with Labour's touted [New Green Deal](#) which has its roots in the [Green New Deal Group](#) formed in 2007 by Caroline Lucas from the Green Party, amongst others. Since then other influential environmentalists, including Dale Vince, have played an important role in shaping and advancing in the public discourse around the climate emergency and raising its importance in the news agenda.

With Ecotricity, green business strategy and corporate environmental responsibility go hand in hand. The company's various research and development initiatives and innovations (in energy, transport and, more recently, food) alongside proactive partnerships, campaigning communications and strong, uncompromising values and leadership have won Dale Vince many friends and enemies; a loyal, if niche customer base and a public profile and political influence far beyond what a company of Ecotricity's size might expect.

In the next decade, such qualities and deep-green values may come to pose a challenge to traditional CSR practices and point the way towards a more root-and-branch approach to sustainability. We have been warned that the world has to dramatically accelerate the transition toward clean energy now to prevent greenhouse gas emissions exceeding levels which scientists agree will lead to irreversible and catastrophic climate change. ([New York Times](#) 2018). The threat of runaway global warming and the need for immediate action by businesses to encompass 'deep decarbonization' of the economy (IPCC 2019) give greater urgency for businesses to play their role in promoting greater environmental responsibility; and developing and diffusing environmentally friendly technologies (see [UN Global Compact 2019](#)). This case study may offer indicators as to what kind of business and business leadership is required for the crisis we all face.

## Questions for Dale Vince

1) We are interested in the values that underpin Ecotricity and your leadership of it. Clearly these are green values relating to respect for nature and the need for a sustainable energy system, economy and lifestyle. Where do you think these values originated from? Does anxiety or frustration ever fuel some of the campaigns you run? Have these values evolved in any way since the founding of Ecotricity?

The values are my own, they are axiomatic to me, as being the right way to operate/live. Anxiety and frustration never fuel our campaigns. Values have evolved as I have grown and we have grown as an organisation.

2) Are there other values – such as a sense of fairness or social justice – that inform decisions made at Ecotricity's?

Yes, fairness and social justice are good examples. Ecotricity is a corporate alter ego in this respect, it operates in the way that I think people should, that I try to do.

3) You have been forthright in communicating your opposition to government policies (such as their support for fracking, Brexit or their housing policy), and pushing for environmentally-informed support or interventions in the energy market. Has this very public-facing lobbying worked for Ecotricity?

If you assume our aim in doing this is to effect change, then I would say yes it has worked to varying degrees over the years. It's about being part of the discussion, airing alternative viewpoints and through that hopefully changing outcomes.

4) You have donated to three political parties – Labour, The Green Party and The Liberal Democrats. Can you talk about your relations to political parties and how much they listen to you on energy policy?

They are all progressive parties when it comes to issues like social justice - and more relevantly Renewable Energy. Where there is a relationship there is a chance to be heard on issues like RE and to make a difference to policy. That has happened with the Labour Party, according to them.

5) The phrase 'people and planet before profit' suggests you should not make a profit at the expense of the planet. How difficult is it to compete against companies that have less ethical qualms about the environmental damage they cause? Do you think having deep green values ever closes opportunities for you, perhaps making you a target, or does it mean you can dominate a section of the market?

The word Profit is a bit uncomfortable for me, I feel it's a dirty word or concept. This phrase is all well and good, but I wonder if it's from the CSR department of some big org. Making money is essential to being able to do our work - but we exist for our mission and make money to fulfil that, normal companies exist to make money and might chip in a bit to a good cause - the essential difference is posed by the question - do you live to eat or eat to live? We eat to live.

How you make money is also important, but it ought to be obvious enough not to do that at the expense of people or the environment.

It's never a problem operating in the way that we do, the opportunities that are closed to us are of our own choosing. Not buying energy from industrial farming for example or supplying companies we don't consider ethical, like McDonalds. We lose nothing when we make these choices, we keep our principles.

6) You recently said “Capitalism has become a force of evil in the world and I don’t think it originated in that way and it doesn’t need to be that way. The pursuit of profit has taken priority over people, over the environment, over everything”. Is it possible for governments to regulate or intervene in the market so that capitalism can become a sustainable force for good, or does competition always lead to a race to the bottom of environmental and ethical standards? Can you see your 2030 Vision becoming a reality, or is it simply an aspiration?

Yes of course it is, government’s intervene wherever they want for the outcome they want. The rules of capitalism are set by us, they are not laws of physics. Governments can and should change the rules for business, competition will always be within the rules (except for cheating) if the rules focus on money so does the competition, if the rules focus on other issues, so must the competition. It’s totally possible to set the rules so that companies must for example adopt ISO14000 and pursue a zero carbon target. At the moment companies first priority is to shareholders, it’s in company law, this should change and the tax system should be used to reward environmental outcomes and penalise ‘business as usual’.

7) You have not been afraid of challenging some very big companies in your communications. Was the call for customers to ‘Dump the Big Six’ effective and did it bring any flak with it? Are there any tangles with bigger companies that you have come to regret?

Very effective. Flak is the measure of impact. No regrets.

8) Can you talk about your decision to be a vegan and the communications around this? What issues and opportunities does the focus on lifestyle and food choices raise for an energy company like Ecotricity? (*does Ecotricity have any connections to the Vegan Society and are these kinds of associations important in growing the company?*)

Being vegan is a moral issue first and foremost for me, subsequently the impact of meat and dairy on human health came into view (a few decades ago) and more recently the impact on climate change - so three great reasons to stop eating animals and their bodily functions - animal rights, human health and climate change. Any one reason is good enough, all three are overwhelming. No serious environmental person or organisation can not endorse the move away from meat and dairy - it’s essential if we are to fight climate change. But some are still on the fence. XR for example - radical in so many ways, reticent about giving up meat.....

9) Is the term Corporate Social Responsibility one you recognize or find useful? (*In relation to the sustainable, impact-conscious, community-focused work of the company*)

I recognise it as BS. Any company that has to have such a thing is inherently a bad company, and CSR is window dressing.



10) We have read that you were once a peace campaigner. Is there a campaigning dimension to the work you do today and is there anything you learned as a peace activist that has carried over into Ecotricity's communications?

Yes, much of what we do is campaigning - we are trying to change the world, using business as a medium, and football more recently.

11) How much involvement do you have in your company's social media? Do you think that the content of Ecotricity's communications accurately reflects the values of ecotricity? Is social media communication by yourself and Ecotricity planned and coordinated over the year or is it mostly responding to events and developments as they unfold? Is there a team working on the social media?

I have a significant role in this and I try to make sure that it all reflects our values and views. Much of what we do is reactive, we have no calendar of events that I am aware of - but I don't do everything....

12) Is there anything else you would like to say about Green Values or the values of Ecotricity and how these have helped/hindered the growth of the company?

Green values can't ever hinder, IMO. And I'd rather have a small green company than a large not green one, for obvious reasons. The world is moving this way, ten or twenty years from now the things we do will be far more mainstream - we've already seen that in Energy, Transport and Food, our three big areas of work - renewable energy has become mainstream, electric cars are on the verge and plant based living has really taken off in the last few years. Decades ago these were fringe ideas.

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