

## THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### Summary

All of the human problems on Earth are nested in consciousness. This is true for major social problems such as energy shortages, pollution, over-population, war, and so on, as it is for the myriad small dilemmas which we face in our private daily lives.

When groups of people are able to share a common “frame of mind” with respect to their sense of time, space, purpose and rules for action, such as occurs during the construction of a building or the playing of a game of football, human goals may be achieved, often with great ease and satisfaction.

Unfortunately, although we have become highly skilled in developing common mental frameworks for various concrete activities, our capacity to develop and share conceptual frameworks seems negligible when it comes to the so-called “big issues.”

In every instance where humans fail to share a common “frame of mind” there is a near total inability to see and understand how the various pieces of the proverbial “big picture” fit together. And, in the absence of a reliable strategy for seeing the larger patterns, within which our perceptions are embedded, we make our daily choices based upon the strategies we have. This generally means that we use orientations and methods for arriving at choices which are inappropriate for the size and type of problem under concern. A phrase customarily uttered to justify this behavior is, “We have to do the best that we can.” (US Government. 1973)

## 1. The Problematique

The principal weakness of *Our Common Future* was the failure to deal in a straightforward manner with the huge social and political barriers to any transition to more sustainable forms of development. The task may have simply been beyond the capacity of a 22-member body that covered the entire political spectrum as contextualized in 1984. Perhaps the greatest weakness of sustainable development lies in the fact that we have not yet begun to invent a politics to go with the concept.

This question, as with all sustainable development issues, has many facets. The status quo is driven in large part by the “politics of more” and the “politics of react-and-cure.” Whatever the issue, politicians will avoid it until they discover a way of dealing with it by promising “more.” They never promise less. We have the politics of more. We have no politics of less. That is why political parties, governments, and institutions like the OECD and the World Bank have a genetic aversion to the notion of “limits.” It implies “less”. And how, politically, can political institutions appear to support measures that appear to offer less and retain the support of the people and institutions that keep them in power?

The politics of environmental protection are basically the standard politics of react-and-cure. This is why politicians love first generation type issues like river pollution (especially when the rivers are so polluted they catch fire) or lake eutrophication (especially after the lakes are pronounced “dead.”). They are politically easy. Politicians can be heroes. They can react with passion, mount a white charger and promise to slay the dragons and cure the problem, while offering more, not only more clean air and clean water, but also more direct grants, tax breaks and subsidies to pay for remedial measures and create far more jobs and income. And their favorite index, the GNP, provides them with very positive feedback.

How, then, do we learn to package the policies of anticipate and prevent—the politics of sustainable development—in ways that politicians would find equally attractive. Take a third generation issue like global warming. Can we package the policies needed to slow global warming in ways that make them vote winners, rather than vote losers?

Political systems will have no trouble responding with react-and-cure adaptation measures after the damage is done. Once temperatures and sea levels start to rise significantly, with consequences that are obvious to electors, there will be votes to be made in promising short-term measures to address the symptoms: dikes, for example, to protect urban centers and coastal areas from increased flooding; or new docks and

harbors to replace those lost by flood damage; or, subsidized electrical rates for household air conditioning; or, pipeline to bring water from distant sources to replace aquifers invaded by sea-water; and on and on. There are, in fact, gold mines of attractive political promises, and potential ribbon-cutting ceremonies, in react-and-cure policies to adapt to global warming. For example, President Clinton stated, “If summers keep getting warmer, governments would have to begin subsidizing air conditioning.”

The task of creating a sustainable society is a political one, requiring a political party with a platform. Can ways be found to translate the measures needed to limit global warming into political benefit for leaders who not only advocate them, but also implement them? Overcoming the polarization of more and less at the political level will be the major task for the forces of social change in the next decades.

## 2. Current Context

The core problem for governance for sustainable development is that it has inherited from the nineteenth century a model or organization that is structured around functions and services, rather than around solving problems. Instead, our modern context demands new ways of organizing around the problems of sustainable development. The nature of sustainable development in and of itself demands new ways of organizing, and it is only when governments organize dynamically around the problems and respond to the modern context that they become more relevant to citizens and contribute to a more robust civil society. What are the characteristics of sustainable development problems? They:

- are more complex and interactive than is generally assumed;
- are ones that emerge in several places and suddenly, for example, the hole in the ozone layer, rather than ones that emerge only locally at a speed that is rapid enough to be noticed;
- move both human and natural systems into such novel and unfamiliar territory that aspects of the future are not only uncertain, but are inherently unpredictable;
- are ones where knowledge, therefore, will always be uncertain and information incomplete;
- transcend man-made political boundaries;
- are scale, place and time dependent, and must be defined according to the type, intensity and frequency of use;
- are interdependent and holistic, and
- have highly diffused contexts, involving a multiplicity of actors.

Sustainable development issues, therefore:

- (a) have multiple contexts;
- (b) involve multiple and often diametrically opposed values;
- (c) demand an unprecedented interface between academic research and public policy, and
- (d) there is no such thing as sustainable development expertise, but rather, a multiplicity of expertise.

In order to effectively respond to sustainable development imperatives, we require

- (a) multiple ways of organizing around specific issues, depending upon context.
- (b) multiple tools,
- (c) multiple research methodologies, and, most importantly,
- (d) interdisciplinary networks of collaboration.

It is clear that sustainable development problems require totally different ways of organizing—organic, self-organizing and much more flexible structures that respond to the different contexts surrounding each issue. It may well be that the ability to respond to rapidly changing contexts may be negatively correlated to size, and the positioning of *ad hoc* structures at the edges of existing organizations may be more effective. For in nature, the greatest diversity and richest food sources often occur at the edges of two intersecting ecological systems.

One of the greatest single barriers to sustainable development is the way in which we have traditionally organized our institutions (Davidson and Dence. 1988). Government organization around problems, rather than structures and functions is a positive trend, and provides an ability to transcend existing organizational paralysis, or what I have often referred to in Canada, as solitudes, stovepipes and silos (Dale 2001). In fact, there are important lessons to be learned from two areas, acid rain and climate change, that have succeeded because of some or all of the following:

- international regime (s) formation;
- international scientific consensus;
- industry and public awareness and knowledge; and
- non-governmental coalitions.

For example, the increasing domestic and international emphasis we now have on climate change would not have been achieved without the scientific consensus of the International Panel on Climate Change, beginning in 1995.

### **3. Barriers to a Politics**

One of the main reasons we have not developed a politics of sustainable development, that is, a cohesive constituency, is simply because of the fragmentation within key sectors involved in its promulgation—the development, environmental, health, peace and women’s movements, to name but a few. What would normally be a driving force for implementation, the interest of so many sectors of civil society, effectively prevents an overall cohesive coalition of many interests. The problem is inherent in the nature of the beast. As described above, sustainable development issues are broad and horizontal, cutting across all sectors of society. As well, problem-solving and decision-making in this domain is difficult precisely because solutions are not clear-cut and future consequences of alternative actions are uncertain, and issues are not often rationally bounded.

Hence, stakeholders bring different perspectives, and are usually issue driven in that they hold one issue primordial. In addition, the stakes and values are high, and thus, this very diversity may be dysfunctional in that it leads to intense fragmentation. Even within particular issues, there can be very differing perspectives, often from a dualistic framework. For example, with respect to population, some see population in and of

itself as a driving force; others see consumption as more primordial, whereas many others see both population and consumption as driving forces. And to complicate matters further, there is a major geographical solitude, the North-South split.

And with certain issues, questions of scale also arise. For example, with respect to biodiversity conservation, experts vary greatly on whether or not to work at the habitat, population or species level. The reconciliation of these competing perspectives, therefore, is central to the development of any coherent regime and a subsequent cohesive political force for sustainable development. The lack of a new politics for sustainable development has also been affected by a lack of consensus on what the restraining forces for implementation are and the driving forces for unsustainability.

Moreover, “just as there is no single culture, there is no single meaning of sustainable development. You cannot homogenize development, unsustainable or otherwise, in the presence of what are multiple, distinctly heterogeneous cultures and actors. Pluralism must remain the criterion of efficacy. . .The really big policy question [is] how to encourage the constructive interaction of these plural and in eradicable actors” (Thompson 1993). It may well be that a sufficient politics for sustainable development will only emerge in those uncommon, complex moments when policies, problems and politics converge so that the problems of the moment are tangent to the policies of the moment (Roe 1998). This convergence could be facilitated by governments, through deliberate decision, avoid protracted debate over which perspective is morally superior or issue more predominant by creating semi-permanent coalitions. With attendant resources, coalitions have the opportunity to develop more cohesive civil society constituencies around sustainable development.

There are structural barriers, solitudes, silos and stovepipes, that mitigate against its implementation, that is, its structural organization, particularly when civil society groups are organized around issues. Clearly, there is a fundamental mismatch that, once again, militates against developing cohesive policy and political constituencies.

We know enough to act now. Although it may seem in developed countries that social and economic indicators are improving dramatically, it is clear from the ecological evidence that there is one indicator that has been consistently trending down, the environment. The difficulty is that we are all playing in such different sand boxes. The most critical role for post-modern governments may be to catalyze regime formation and innovative coalitions. The most important role that governments can play in the twenty-first century is to longer control and monitor, but to lead through stimulating creative partnerships and catalyzing more cohesive dialogues in civil society. One such example is the Canadian round table experience, begun in 1988.

#### **4. A Canadian Experiment**

Over the last two decades (1980s and 1990s), there have been increasing demands in Canada for greater public participation normally regarded as the legitimate prerogative of the state. Many Canadians are questioning the ability of their governments and its officials to represent the diversity and complexity of their increasingly plural society. As public knowledge increased about regulatory regimes during the 1980s, the public was

also becoming more aware of the complexities and interactive characteristics of environmental risks. Scientific expertise could no longer resolve some of the practical problems facing Canadian society. Controversies surrounding the citing of incinerators and landfills could not be resolved nor accepted, without acceding to the demands for wider community involvement as the phenomenon of not in my back yard (NIMBY) became an influential force in decision-making.

Canadians no longer readily accept decisions made by their political leaders, simply by virtue of their leadership; rather they demand explicit criteria and explanations about their logic and approaches. Post-industrial societies have been culturally influenced by both technological developments and information explosions, giving more and more forums for increasing diversity. Voices are demanding to be heard that previously had no voice, the indigenous, women, immigrant and visible minorities and the disabled.

Values of Canadian post-industrial society are fundamentally different from those of previous generations, they are consequently much more diverse and plural. There are higher values placed around having more say in determining the course of public policy and second, having a secure right to express one's views about issues of public policy without fear of punishment.

Further compounding the Holy Grail of increased public participation and transparency in decision-making is the growing imperative to integrate ecological, social and economic decision-making, and the consequent push to move from a more traditional sectoral approach to multipartite approaches. Two additional pressures stimulating this demand were the seeming inability of current public institutions to quickly respond to the emerging ecological imperatives and growing convergence and acceptance of sustainable development as a governance approach. Among the most significant institutional forms which take us "beyond nations" are organizations, networks, and communities which lie somewhere between the purely public and purely private domains (Elkins 1995).

#### **4.1. Round Table Process**

Influenced by the intense debate and activity generated by the Brundtland Commission on the Environment and Development, the Canadian Council of Resource and Environment Ministers established a National Task Force in 1986 to initiate dialogue on environment-economy integration among Canada's environment ministers, senior executive officers from industry, and representatives from environmental organizations and the academic community. The Task Force's subsequent report strongly reinforced the idea that economic developers and environmental protectors could not continue to operate in isolation from each other. Included as one of their recommendations was the establishment of Round Tables on the Environment and the Economy in each jurisdiction in Canada to provide a forum for continuing dialogue between partners interested in achieving sustainable development. Their influence was expected to primarily manifest itself through all Round Table Chairs being appointed by and reporting to their respective First Ministers.

The recommendation to create Round Table was endorsed by the Canadian Council of Resource and Environment Ministers and, in October 1988, the Prime Minister announced the creation of a National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) chaired by Dr. David Johnston, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of McGill University. At the same time, an Executive Director and a small planning committee was immediately put in place to develop its institutional infrastructure and *modus operandi*.

Instead of following the more traditional institutional model of bringing together individuals or businesses that have common interests or goals, round tables were multipartite and reflected different backgrounds and experiences, different perspectives and insights, different values and beliefs. In a sense, they are microcosms of society itself with memberships that draw from the political levels of governments, the corporate sector, academe and research institutes, the scientific community, and a variety of public interest and professional groups.

They operate in the context of common imperatives—those being the challenge of integrating environment and economy in Canadian institutions and decision-making, and the need to share across sectors the responsibility for bringing about that change. They are not designed to develop or deliver programs of their own. They have no legislative authority to set government policy or enforce compliance with laws or regulations. And they do not purport or enforce compliance with laws or regulations. And they are not the major source of expertise on the complex technical aspects of economic or ecological systems. Through their members and their respective spheres of influence, they act as catalysts to forge new strategic partnerships, to stimulate the search for viable solutions, and to build a broad consensus on what must change, who should bear the costs, and how and when those costs should be borne. Their impact depends significantly on their independence from vested interests, their access to the views of key sectors of society, and the credibility of their members individually and collectively.

#### **4.2. Operating Structure**

Within this overall catalytic framework, any issue identified by the National Round Table as an initiative had to satisfy the following criteria: strategic, rather than operational; multipartite and cross-disciplinary; inter-jurisdictional or interdepartmental; longer-term; focused on the means and not the ends, and of federal, national or international scope.

With respect to the NRTEE appointments, the planning committee decided to take a completely different approach to their selections from the CCME recommendation that its membership should have a representative from each province and the two territories. In addition to provincial representation, there was also the question of traditional sectoral representation, if the forestry association, then the mining association, and so forth. Having decided a maximum of no more than twenty-five people was optimal, the committee subsequently chose not to select people on the basis of groups or associations or industries they represented, but rather to identify key decision-makers who would be able to influence certain networks, a significant departure from the traditional statist

approach. In addition, the committee looked at what linkages were strategic to its work. Obviously, there was a need to link to CCME, the scientific community, and so forth. Four broad categories for membership were then identified, government, business, strategic public policy and environmental non-government community. In addition to these four categories, and balance between environmental and economic interests, care was taken to reflect regional sensitivities, gender balance, labor, native and language. This was a significant departure from the normal appointment process at the national level. Normally, people are traditionally selected either because of their political affiliation, their profile nationally, their sectoral representativity, regional representation, or affiliation with a particular industry association. As evidence of the significant departure from normal appointments, nine of the original twenty-five members were female, quite a remarkable departure in the composition of boards normally appointed by the Canadian government.

The planning committee envisioned a process designed to change the way Government made its decisions and to influence how policy was developed, which required the building and negotiation of new bases for trust, both among the individuals sitting at the table and within the networks they could influence. In addition to this building of both personal and professional trust, it was necessary to forge a common agenda built around a common language.

Further, the national round table process differed significantly from traditional decision-making bodies in another fundamental way. Rather than presenting information through a bureaucratic filter, information was directly presented to the members, and it was the members working through the problems and solutions, reaching consensus and making decisions on sustainable development. Innovative and creative solutions would only be found through the dialogue and interaction between the members at the table that would result in new dialogues.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Ann Dale** is currently a professor in the Science, Technology & Environment Division at Royal Roads University where she directs the Environment and Management Program and teaches on sustainable development theory, governance and decision-making. From 1993-2001, she served as a Senior Associate with the Sustainable Development Research Institute (SDRI) at the University of British Columbia, helping to guide the Institute strategically. She also developed and continues to edit the Sustainable Development biannual book series. In addition, she chairs the Canadian Consortium for Sustainable Development Research (CCSDR).

Dr. Dale is both an academic and an activist. As an activist, she has founded a 30 million dollar people's trust for the environment, called the National Environmental Treasure. She is also a founding member and Executive Coordinator of the Research and Public Policy Office of the Canadian Biodiversity Institute. From 1998-2000, she led a national energy efficiency program on behalf of Association of Canadian Community Colleges.

Prior to joining SDRI in 1993, Dr. Dale was an Executive with the Federal Government of Canada, working across a number of diverse portfolios that included shared natural resource management, regional economic development, conflict of interest and regulatory reform. She was instrumental in the creation of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency in 1987, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy in 1988, as well as two of the Neilson Program Task Forces (Regulatory Reform and Natural Resources). She also worked in the Privy Council Office from 1985 to 1987 on other commissions and task forces dealing mainly with machinery of government issues and strategic policy.