



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Clegg's Horizon Shift: the new politics of the future

Halina Ward, September 2010

UK Deputy Prime Minister Clegg today delivered a **key speech** in which he called for a 'horizon shift'. Our political culture, he said at the Institute of Government, "*and in many ways our society more generally - has become too focused on immediate needs and demands, rather than considering our obligations to the future. We need to look towards a further horizon.*" So far so good.

Of course it is no coincidence that the kinds of cuts in public spending that are heading our way might be easier for the government to implement if we all shared a sense of commitment to the long-term. But how does the speech stack up against the goal of equipping democracy to deliver sustainable development?

Close readers of this blog will remember that in early June 2010 we and more than twenty other signatories wrote to PM Cameron and DPM Clegg **calling for the two to adopt a 'new politics of the future'**. And here it is.

Clegg's speech highlights many of the problems that we at FSD also often point to in our work. He notes the tendency for individuals and businesses to take the short-term, rather than a long-term, view. (On this, he suggests that the government's behavioural economics team will be investigating the kinds of 'commitment devices' that might encourage people to make long-term choices - an intriguing suggestion not entirely unrelated to a proposal I made in an earlier post about the **role of times and places when we think long-term**). He notes that "*Many of the decisions we make today will affect the lives of our children, and our children's children*" and that social justice "*includes justice between the generations, too*". And he suggests that: "*The ... most important .. symptom of political short-termism is the failure to confront long-term problems requiring uncomfortable short-term solutions. Climate change; pensions; social care; social mobility; fiscal deficit; welfare reform - the list is long*".

But what is the goal of Clegg's 'horizon shift' - the ends to which it is to be dedicated? Almost bafflingly, the speech ends with the flourish:

"It falls to our political generation to take the necessary steps now for a better, fairer future. Reform and change today is necessary if we want mobility and prosperity

tomorrow. That's the horizon shift we need. That's what the Coalition Government is about."

Not social justice then. Not a better quality of life, let alone sustainable development. But rather 'mobility' and 'prosperity'.

If those goals are to be taken as any more than a rhetorical damp squib (and surely they must, for there it is in the final paragraph of a defining speech in this government's term), it's deeply worrying.

'Mobility' and 'prosperity' ought, surely, never be treated as more than means to wider ends.

Other important 'democracy challenges' to sustainable development are missing. There is no mention of the tension between economic growth and environmental protection or social justice goals. In fact, there is no direct mention at all of the term 'sustainable development', even though principles of intergenerational and intragenerational justice are key to sustainable development.

This is an omission which will further strengthen the sense of many people in the UK that this government has withdrawn from the idea of sustainable development as a guiding societal goal. (See, for example, the new government's announcement that it was withdrawing funding for the independent watchdog the Sustainable Development Commission). And it is at the very least worrying just two years before a planned [2012 World Conference on Sustainable Development](#), dubbed 'Rio+20' (since it'll take place twenty years after the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development). Instead, the commitments to social justice, economic development and environmental protection in the speech are all present, but joined by the idea of long-term thinking and a 'new horizon'. The critical idea of integration across the three so-called 'pillars' of sustainable development isn't there.

The speech offers seven examples of ways in which the coalition government has "*begun to show that we are serious about a longer term approach to policy and politics*". On the environment, for example, the speech says that:

"The Coalition Government is pushing hard to get the whole of the EU to sign up to tough targets for reducing carbon emissions - 30% below 1990 levels by 2020. We are under no illusions about how difficult these targets will be to meet. Our Green Deal, Green Investment Bank and our strategy for low-carbon energy production are the first steps in an ambitious programme to meet our pledge to be the greenest government ever".

Linked to rumours that the Treasury sees the budget of the Department for Energy and Climate Change as among the ripest for cuts, this is hardly a recipe for natural resource resilience or genuine environmental justice.

But it's a start. Some of the words are good ones. And it's an approach that we can usefully work with.

Clegg's speech is an invitation to hold this government to account on its commitment to intergenerational justice. And it is curious, therefore, that there is no reference to any reforms or innovations in democratic institutions and process that could support his hoped-for cultural shift in politics.

With partners, FSD is now investigating institutional mechanisms for bringing the interests of future generations into political decision-making in the UK. An institution to champion the interests of future generations may be what's needed to hold the government to its word, to ensure that its horizons are genuinely long-term, and that our duties to future generations are properly recognised and respected.