

The Environment Foundation, 21st Century Trust and the Dana Centre

Consultation

on

Democracy and Sustainability

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The Science Museum's Dana Centre, London

SUMMARY

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An unusual combination of actors came together to explore the question: What is the relationship between democracy and sustainability? Led by [The Environment Foundation](#) and [The 21st Century Trust](#), with additional financial support from [The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#), the project also drew in [SustainAbility](#) and [The Dana Centre](#) at London's Science Museum, where the debate was held—with Lord Patten in the chair. The background can be found at <http://democracy.sustainability.com/>

21 years after Brundtland

The opening session at The Dana Centre attempted to assess how far sustainability had come since the Brundtland Commission two decades ago. The first speaker, Dr Camilla Toulmin, Director of the International Institute for Environment and Development ([IIED](#)), argued that the balance at the planetary level was not good enough, with a large and growing deficit in many areas. In particular, humans are compromising the ability of future and current generations to meet their needs, particularly in the area of climate change.

Despite a huge number of summits, studies, commitments, and publications, the pace, scale, and scope of change remained inadequate. In particular the focus on market based mechanisms to address these problems had meant reliance on the same paradigm as had caused the difficulties in the first place.

On the positive side:

- Activists had abandoned outdated assumptions about government, business, and citizens, as the reaction of each to important sustainability issues was no longer predictable.
- Huge amounts of information on the environment, geophysical process, and the social implications of environmental change now existed, as well as fantastic mechanisms to monitor changes in key variables.
- There had been a great strengthening of the intergovernmental process in

addressing these issues, although as bargaining had become tougher, progress had tended to slow.

On the negative side:

- Activists, and the world in general, had grown more used to increasing levels of inequality, both nationally and international.
- Current politics were not yielding the outcomes which were desirable for sustainability.
- Popular understanding of the scale of change and investment required to avert disaster remained incomplete. The [Stern Report on the economics of climate change](#) had been overly optimistic in that regard. People had not yet begun to take on board the scale of shifts in investment and of transfers that would be necessary.

In the future, Dr Toulmin thought that the most important need for advocates of sustainable development would be to shift from an emphasis on economics to one on the principles of justice. Instead of focussing on policy, they should to engage with people and electorates, and reinvigorate the political process.

The lens of public opinion

Doug Miller, President of [Globescan](#), talked next about the significance of data from a poll his company had undertaken for the BBC World Service on climate change.

It had found that most people had concluded that climate change was happening, was induced by human activity, and that it required major steps to address. Climate change had also put broader environmental questions back on the global agenda. The current wave of interest differed from widespread environmental interest twenty years ago because it now encompassed both the developed and the developing world. It was also noteworthy that, rather than reducing interest in other sustainability issues, climate change was increasing it: in particular concern about poverty remained high.

Public opinion relating to democracy was another matter according to the study. Trust in politicians was now at all time lows, as was confidence in national governments to deliver necessary solutions. Also, in only a handful of countries did respondents believe that government decisions took into account views of the people – what should be a fundamental aspect of democracy.

On the link between democracy and sustainable development, most respondents held that the former helped the latter because of voter pressure. That said, experts were split on whether capitalism – usually present with liberal democracy – aided or inhibited sustainable development: 36% held the latter, 28% the former.

Overall, Mr Miller believed the figures showed that people's survival instinct was becoming activated. As planet spoke through extreme weather events, people were starting to listen.

A younger lens

Jenny Pidgeon, a consultant at [Upstream](#), and a graduate of the Forum for the [Future Scholarship Programme](#), then scoped the coming twenty years from the perspective of the younger generation. She emphasised the need for radical and speedy change, given the challenge not only of climate change but also of declining resources, collapsing ecosystems, growing inequality between the rich and poor, and widespread lack of trust and engagement by the British public in their political system.

As Tim Smit, founder of the [Eden Project](#) had put it: what must happen over the coming 10 or 20 years needs to be the biggest cultural change since the Renaissance. We need a much more dynamic, inclusive, participative and values-driven democracy. At present there are political gestures made towards sustainability - but as the recent British budget showed - precious little action.

Our economic model needs to change from the creation of scarcity and ever increasing consumption to one geared to the 'carrying capacity' of the planet and human well-being. It is not as though the doubling of the UK economy since the 1970s, as measured by GDP, has led to any increase in satisfaction, as shown by increasingly sophisticated 'happiness' statistics.

We are seeing glimpses of the primacy of the traditional corporate model, maximizing profits for absentee share-holders, being challenged by social enterprises, optimizing outcomes for all stakeholders. It is vital that we see new indicators coming into play, other than GDP, to capture this and provide measurable goals for policy-making. The 'happy planet index' already exists, for instance, and the groundwork is already there in the work of the [New Economics Foundation](#) and others.

David Miliband said in a recent speech on democracy that there was a danger of public scepticism of politics turning into cynicism. This has already happened. People will vote for X-Factor and Strictly Ballroom, but feel disengaged from the white, male, middle class politicians they see wearing suits on News at Ten. There needs to be genuine diversity among politicians, and far more women in particular, and voting should be easier and in tune with a younger generation who are at home with texting and the Internet. And politicians need to learn how to communicate and not just talk the jargon of 'joined up thinking'.

Power needs to be distributed in a different and properly inclusive way. A fine example is Porto Alegre in Brazil, whereby a significant portion of the city's budget is allocated through neighbourhood deliberations, leading to a reduction in corruption, and to increased efficiencies, and fairer communities. The UK has the beginning of this in the transition town network, which now includes 30 initiatives, and tentative participatory budgeting initiatives in cities like Manchester and Newcastle. This can enhance so much what people believe is possible, what power and social justice can achieve.

87% of Britons state that society today is too materialistic. The sustainability movement, like politicians, needs to up its communications game to indicate to people that there are real choices, and they can prioritize their health and well-being. The introduction of the congestion charge and the banning of smoking show that people are prepared for change to the current paradigm. Another fine example is the 2016 target for zero carbon homes and the new 2019 target for commercial properties. The property industry now has a long term vision, and that needs to be replicated across other sectors.

Finally, education needs also to change gear - away from the obsession with testing and targets which has led to UK schoolchildren being the unhappiest in Europe and towards the reflection and questioning skills which will truly enhance their lives. In particular, they need to learn about power and its distribution and the choices they will face as they become voters.

Like government departments, universities operate in silos of learning and are painfully slow to change. A very broad movement of reflection and action is needed, not just focus on individual policies as though they can be detached from the whole. As Jonathon Porritt put it, 'Sustainability is not an issue'.

A new politics?

John Elkington, Chairman of the Environment Foundation, then introduced group discussions, asking whether there is a choice, whether there are the building blocks of a new politics? Is there a survival instinct responding to challenge, or are we too slow as animals? How do we define our collectivity?

The first group stressed that we need to avoid policy overload and to attend to detail. An example cited again was the relatively new 'full life-cycle' approach to the built environment, where steps were clearly specified and where the right incentives were in place. It was now necessary to communicate these principles across policy boundaries - so, for instance, flood plains should not be used for quick gains.

The group debated the way in which the political agenda is set and one view was that it needed to be established outside regular party politics. Environmentalists were best placed to forge a new consensus, as was achieved with the post-war welfare state, within which politicians would operate. The problem remained the time-scale. Such a reversal of the present neo-liberal consensus was like trying to turn a super-tanker. However, it could be achieved with the right leadership, which, in the age of mass communications, could come from outside the traditional political elite.

The second group looked at how democracy might be used to advance the sustainable development agenda. Most participants did not blame popular opinion for the current slow progress on these issues, but the existing democratic structures. One view was of 'embedded inertia' making it hard to see what can be done. Another identified the current system as 'not fit for purpose', as it made the necessary strong

leadership in this field unlikely. There were, however, two possible, inter-related ways forward. One was to reinvigorate democracy by improving the links between governing and governed so that people will be willing to participate. Similarly, focusing on local governments, where that link is strongest, can – and currently is – having the greatest effect. The greatest innovation is happening at city, local, and other sub-national levels.

The third group asked whether Wikipedia – or social networking sites – offer major contributions to democracy? This group was sceptical, suggesting that Wikipedia should be viewed simply as a source of information and that tools such as those offered by Facebook or Wikipedia underpin a fragmented, disaggregated world in which people are increasingly locked into private, not public, experiences. One participant suggested that Facebook is ‘part of the politics of distraction, which is the main politics of our time’. The younger generation, participants complained, simply no longer ‘gets mad’ about big issues in this world. Another problem may be that the environmental movement is itself fragmented, disaggregated, and consequently ill-equipped to tackle the challenges of the day.

Perhaps a major crisis is needed to galvanise action on major issues of sustainability? But it is hard to think of the kind of crisis that would be guaranteed to trigger action on sustainable development in response. An economic crisis would likely simply increase tribalism; and natural catastrophe – as with Hurricane Katrina – has also failed to catalyse change. One problem amply illustrated by Katrina is that ‘when the villains and the victims are the same people, we have no cultural iconography’ to help assimilate the meaning of the catastrophe and catalyse action. The events of 9/11 simply led to an increase in mechanisms of social control. We cannot reliably suggest that crisis could catalyse action towards sustainability.

Finally, the group reflected on the question ‘what is our collectivity’, suggesting that ‘youth’ might provide a shared identity that could be applied to galvanise action. The main challenge, then, should be to find ways to ‘get the young to be more revolting’ – to get young people to leave their fragmented, disaggregated social worlds and press for change.

Sustainability and the city

These themes were then encapsulated by Tom Burke, co-founder of E3G and adviser to Rio Tinto, in a presentation to members of the public who participated in an event later that evening, focusing on sustainability and the city, and London in particular. It took the form of a ‘Question Time’ panel, chaired by Lord (Chris) Patten, with John Elkington; Samantha Heath, Director of [London Sustainability Exchange](#); Sara Parkin, Founder Director of [Forum for the Future](#); and Charles Secrett, Special Advisor on Environment & Sustainability to the [Mayor of London](#) and Visit London.

As Professor Chris Rapley, [Director of the Science Museum](#), observed, the debate and the close involvement of the audience showed the increasing importance to the public of these key issues in sustainability. The question remains how fast politicians

can catch up with, and articulate effectively, these concerns.