

Democracy and Sustainability

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I have read the excellent contributions to this enormously important debate by Ian Christie and Sara Parkin.

I would like to add my contribution in ways that build on, and extend, what they offer.

1. *Global tipping points*. I am convinced that the excellent modelling by Tim Lenton and John Schellenhuber, and many others, as instigated by Jim Lovelock (*The Revenge of Gaia*, Penguin Books, 2007) is providing us with a vision of “abrupt change” in planetary systems functions. (Lenton et al. (2008) Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 105(6):1786-93).

This group of modellers now have evidence of significant alterations to various global processes, involving melting of sea and mountain ice, shifts in, and warming of, oceanic currents, oceanic acidification, possible tundra melt, rainforest drying and latitudinal movements in monsoonal patterns. All of these events could take place within 100 years. Some are more “linear” than others. Not all of these monitored events are likely, as yet, to result in inflationary, or runaway, effects.

But the melting of the Greenland ice-cap, and the drying of the over-cut Amazonian forest could create reinforcing change. We have no complete idea of what might occur as a consequence. But the ice-cap melt, over a period of some 20 years from 10 years from now, could lead to a global sea level rise of at least a metre. Think of the consequences to over 20 mega cities whose water supplies and drainage systems cannot cope with this onslaught. Or of the many millions who live close to the sea with virtually no current protection. The loss of the tropical forest biome, which recycled nearly half of its water through its own evapo-transpiration, is even more problematic to model.

This suggests that 100 years should be our political time window horizon for sustainability and democracy. The melting of the Greenland ice cap, drying of the tropical forests and monsoonal shifts all could take place within 50 years, i.e. well inside the lives of many on the planet right now. But all of these “tipping points” could work to establish a set of processes of “irreversible change”. These may take well

over 1000 years to reverse, even if immediate remedial action was taken in the latter part of the 100 year “window”. So the millennium becomes the “ethical” time horizon, to which contemporary sustainability politics should be bound. In short, we face time scales of outcomes linked to day to day present policy and behaviour that have consequences for decades, centuries and millennia ahead.

2. Linked to these abrupt changes are possible social and economic “tipping points”. These include “peak oil” (a period of high and rising oil and gas prices due to political instability and not just to lowering reserves); mobilisation and migration of dispositional peoples (possibly 30 million over the next 50 years); soil and fresh stock degradation, again occurring catastrophically quickly (around 25 years) and exacerbated by migration of the desperate, as well as large scale deforestation (50 years). All of this will add to the mobilisation of CO₂ as the natural “sinks” of sequestration, in the oceans and the biota, become weakened. So the models of CO₂ atmospheric concentrations may be far too “low” in trajectory. The “2 degree” warming “ceiling” may require much sharper CO₂ reduction much sooner.
3. There is, however, hope. As both Ian Christie and Sara Parkin suggest, we may realise this, as a human family, and confront a possible peril collectively. This may include the kind of “war footing” that took place in the early 1940s when whole-scale shifts of established institutions—national governments, war economies, social mobilisation, acceptable guidance in behaviour, and a common sense of collective survival—all coordinated on both sides of the “war machine”.
4. So we could witness a “democratic tipping point” along the lines suggested by this Democracy for Sustainability initiative. If nothing else, the time is ripe.
5. Ian Christie rightly challenges this prospect by arguing that there is, as yet, no common “enemy” (except, uncomfortably, us); we are carbon obsessed and dependent; global institutions control democratic national and international governing mechanisms; and most of the electorate are still too unaware of the possible outcomes of not changing their cherished, carbon using, behaviour. Yet we also have “internet democracy”, “citizen surveillance” of web-based scrutiny and activism, and the emergence of local sustainability politics, as both Ian and Sara, in their different ways, have noted. So action locally aimed at more sustainable living can be instigated and emulated, and communities can be encouraged by the lead taken by others.

6. My suggestion is that we need a mass mobilisation of virtue in both civic responsibility and political accountability, coupled into a verifying dialogue of the consequences for the whole gamut of society and economy if nothing is done except what Jonathon Porritt terms “crabby incrementalism”. If neither citizens nor politicians can be virtuous, then we will never get virtue. Virtue applies to three critical variables:
 - (i) autonomy—a capacity to act with free will;
 - (ii) responsibility—a capacity to be accountable to others, to future generations, and to the life-nourishing “web of life” on the planet;
 - (iii) awareness of actions—a capacity to know what are the consequences of our behaviour, including what we should do to avoid dangerous outcomes.

We are now in a position to be more aware about the consequences of our individual and collective actions, so we cannot deny either accountability or responsibility.

7. Along with Ian and Sara, I suggest we need to re-establish the notion of the elected representation along lines of merit and responsiveness – i.e. virtue qualifications. There is less need for political parties as such and more for informed and courageous consensus, coupled to virtue citizen surveillance. Some of the ideas of the Kennedy Commission on power and responsibility-citizen initiatives, better use of committees in the legislature, referenda at various geographical scales, and much more political and economic autonomy at the local level, are relevant here.
8. Businesses are also on the move. A fine report on corporate social responsibility in the *Economist* (2 February 2008) concluded that, though there always has to be a profit at the end, businesses see the case for brand reputation and cost saving by being more virtuous. There is also a recognition inside business that social wellbeing is intrinsically a part of good “wellbeing” economics. So business is intimately part of the new democracy for sustainability via virtue ethics and social care. Otherwise the “old” economy will collapse, and businesses are beginning to recognise that.
9. Schools could easily become examples of sustainability living and democracy —not just in the UK, but the world over. One way forward is to establish a progressive approach to sustainability living in all schools for 2012, the advent of the new “Kyoto round”, and to twin every “western” school with a school in developing economies, but based on local cultural norms and sustainability conditions. Not easy, but doable.

10. All of this suggests a democracy for posterity, an ecological democracy that enables both the citizen and the representative to be capable of designing sustainable futures for a very long way ahead, say 100 years. This can only begin to work if there is virtue in both civic life and representative accountability.
11. We will also require considerable “stories” of how future sustainable societies and economies might look like. We need to create, collectively and fairly, many credible visions of what such futures are actually desired, and how we may individually and collectively get to them. This is the charter for democracy and sustainability arising from this initiative. It is worthy of note that there is no actual statement of what a sustainable society and economy would actually be like. So we are groping our way in the dark. Even a dose of virtue cannot guide us. We do need a democracy for sustainability that shares many visions and leads from within to get there.
12. Hopefully SustainAbility and its delightful colleagues will establish a truly meaningful follow through to this effect. This must be the outcome of the discussions on the 18 March—a proper debate with all sections of faith, politics, economics and social mobilisation, that begins a process of human survival that has 25 years to prove itself, before the avoidable irreversibilities set in.

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