
Sustainability: A post-political perspective

The Hon. Dr. Geoff Gallop

Lecture

SUSTSOOS Policy and Sustainability Sydney Law School

2 September 2014

Some might say sustainability is an idea whose time has come and gone. In my lecture today, I will acknowledge the specific historical factors that saw it emerge as a driving force for many jurisdictions but argue at the same time that its inherent plausibility as a decision making principle means it won't vanish from the political landscape. I will also outline the political challenges that face a project of this nature.

However, before getting to the detail let me declare an interest. Sustainability is an idea I embraced when leader of the Western Australian Labor Party from 1996 to 2006. I committed to incorporate it into all that governments think and do- and when victorious in 2001, set about doing just that. This manifested itself in a range of high-level government decisions most notably but not only in environmental protection; for example, stopping the logging of all old growth forests and instituting strong measure to protect the 230km long Ningaloo reef ecosystem. It also meant the development of a strategy to guide the work of Government: Hope for the Future: The Western Australia State Sustainability Strategy (2003). It was a faithful presentation of the ideas that motivated me into politics- a belief that the economy wasn't everything and that the health of the community and the environment mattered too, that the future couldn't and shouldn't be ignored, that partnerships between government, business and the community needed to be nurtured, sometimes radically so, for example with the use of deliberate democracy and, just as importantly, that academic researchers should be at the heart of things and not just occasional commentators.

The emergence of sustainability

I would contend that sustainability emerged first as a critical and then as a guiding principle for some governments as a result of two factors- recognition of the harm humanity was inflicting on the environment and acceptance of the need to properly integrate the post-colonial and developing nations into the world economy. The points of reference were the "ecosystem" and the "the world system" and the principle at stake was "justice" whether considered nationally or globally or from an inter-generational perspective.

The politics of it all were pretty straightforward- how could we sustain a growth model in the advanced economies that undermined the environmental conditions of our existence? Were we doing enough to include those who were excluded, not only in the developing world but also at home where not insignificant minorities, for example indigenous populations, were missing out. Shouldn't we be concerned with more than the growth of our economies?

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought an effective end to the idea that socialism was the way forward and too much had been achieved through industrialization to make a return to the pre-industrial economy feasible. The solution was simple- sustainable development; that is to say development that meets "the needs of current and future generations through integration of

environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity" (Hope for the Future, p.4).

What this principle meant for decision-making at all levels of government-local, national and international- became "the question" for politicians and their public services and for a brief time appeared to be the major driver of global politics. Global, national and local targets emerged- some through formal processes at the highest levels of government and some through community, government-free activity, for example local environmental groups. The discovery that our carbon- based economies were promoting significant climate change was a reminder of the global dimensions of the task at hand.

Sustainability as a project

I trust you would agree with me that there is an inherent-plausibility to this idea. I'll start with the economy and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It's the basis for living standards, a source of employment and an arena open to creative endeavour and innovation. However, it isn't- and can't be- an adequate measure of progress even if the GDP per capita rather than GDP in our guide. People occupy and live in an environment and a society as well. The environment may be built or natural and local or regional but is always global in some sense or another. It's a world we share and one we can ill-afford to damage. The same goes for the society and the many communities that exist within it. We have values that shape our relationships, even if they don't determine them. They relate to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, class, and place and can manifest themselves as drivers of change or supporters of stability. The way people live and the relationships they have does matter and, like the environment, can't be ignored.

Sustainability is a project designed to make sense of this complexity and at the same time locate it within a continuum of past, present and future. It involves a search for the public good in policy and practice. It's not a fixed place as utopians may wish but nevertheless we recognize when we come close to its realization even if at the same time cognizant of the drivers that will inevitably shift its fulcrum. Its neither left nor right but feeds off both. It's reflective of libertarianism, socialism and communitarianism but not overwhelmed by such ideologies.

In academic terms its multi and inter-disciplinary, feeding off economics, sociology and ecology at one level and philosophy and the natural sciences further up the chain. It focuses on the meaning of life as well as its outputs and outcomes and seeks political judgment in the interests of the greater good rather on tribal, party or national interests narrowly conceived. This reminds us that sustainability has enemies, vested interests on the one hand and fundamentalist ideologies on the other.

Challenges to sustainability: fundamentalism and vested interests

In some ways making a contribution to our collective endeavours on the basis of a narrow set of ideas or interests is much easier. When it comes to ideas there are clearly defined poles of attraction, "develop mentalism" in one, exploring and harnessing natural resources to produce goods for consumption, "communitarianism" is another, holding firm on ties that define and bind us as a functioning community. Another, often but not always linked to communitarianism, is "utopianism" or a way of life simple in its pleasures and minimal on its impact on nature.

"Why seek balance between the economy, society and environment", they ask, "why not focus on that which really matters, that is to say growth if you are a developmentalist, social stability if you

are a communitarian and simplicity if you are a utopian?" Strategy for such ideologies is designed to create one, and just one, pathway for the future. This may be the removal of social and regulatory barriers to economic activity or the protection of traditional social relations from the threat posed by change or the peeling away of the layers of consumerism that damage our capacities to co-exist with each other and nature.

For such fundamentalists the big picture we associate with sustainability is code-word for compromise and betrayal. They see the very effort to seek a formula that brings consistency between otherwise contradictory objectives as a logical impossibility and political weakness- its leadership for an ideology they seek.

This is, of course, contrary to the spirit of sustainability which requires dialogue and then negotiation across the boundaries. If it weren't so sustainability would have an easier ride to the centre of things, but it isn't. Each government infrastructure project, each private sector investment proposal and each parliamentary bill will carry contradictory implications that not even the best cost-benefit analysis will be able to resolve however much it assists those empowered to decide.

This being said good sustainability analysis will pay attention to what fundamentalists are saying. There are "bottom-lines" to everything- those lines in the sand beyond which we travel at our peril. It might be a plunge into a new technology whose consequences are not properly examined or a serious cutting of corners to allow for a job-creating investment in an economically deprived area. Having participants in the policy dialogue who are highly tuned to such matters- even if ill- equipped to find answers to the challenges of complexity- can be helpful.

The existence of vested interests poses a similar challenge. They may be businesses dependent for their revenues on clearly unsustainable practices, the policy-defined "silos" within modern bureaucracies or majorities in control of law-making and administration and who discriminates against minorities. Or, indeed, it might be "not-in-my- backyard" activists resisting local changes clearly demonstrated to produce community-wide benefits.

Again there is an inevitability to all of this; a society without interests being impossible to imagine. That's why the ideas of "stakeholder engagement" and "deliberative democracy" are part and parcel of the sustainability agenda, the former being more limited and the latter more expansive in conception and practice. That much sought after "mix" of elements that is the sustainable outcome requires all-round support if it is to win over its fundamentalist and vested interest rivals, particularly those in the economy. It needs the authority we associate with election wins and the gravitas we associate with questions of national security. Properly conducted deliberations have that capacity.

Legislating sustainability

This raises the question as to whether sustainability ought to be embedded in law. In the case of Western Australia I was intending to do this but it wasn't to be- and when I left politics in 2006 the prominence I gave to this issue wasn't maintained. One case study is Manitoba whose Sustainable Development Act (1997) creates a policy-making body, The Manitoba Round Table and a fund, The Sustainable Development Innovations Fund. The Round Table develops strategies for the Province annually and for specific sectors as well as indicators of performance deemed necessary. Under the legislation codes of practice are developed to assist public sector

organizations to undertake their work, including procurement. Provision is also made to incorporate local authorities, school divisions, universities, colleges, and regional health authorities (or hospitals where no such authorities exist).

The definitions used in the Act are as follows:

Sustainability - The capacity of a thing, action, activity, or process to be maintained indefinitely in a manner consistent with the Principles and Guidelines (of sustainable development).

Sustainable Development- meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

In Schedule A of the Act more detail is given on what this means in respect of the integration of environmental and economic decisions, stewardship, shared responsibility, prevention, conservation and enhancement and global responsibility.

What is clear is that the aim is not just to ensure government and its satellites are acting in a particular way but to influence the wider society and its businesses to do the same. In other words it's a whole-of-community as well as whole-of-government initiative. "Manitobans", its states "are caretakers of the economy, the environment, human health and social well-being for the benefit of present and future generations". It's the "equal benefit of present and future generations" that matter and not just for those resident in Manitoba: "Manitobans should think globally when acting locally".

Some technical issues

This, then, is the politics of sustainability- a project for governments wishing to go beyond a narrow-time-bound and economic calculus of national progress. It seeks strategies where none are assumed to exist and dialogue across boundaries none thought porous and penetrable. This leaves us with a whole range of technical issues about how to practice the philosophy. In particular there is the question of definition and what follows when it comes to evaluating performance. What does it mean to have a "strong economy", a "good society" and a "healthy environment"?

In my experience defining a strong economy and a healthy environment has proved to be easier than defining a good society, there being a good deal of agreement across the spectrum on economic and environmental indicators. When it comes to our social relationships and their consequences it's not so easy, there being plenty of ideology involved. One way to measure society is to look to outcomes like levels and degrees of violence, oppression and discrimination but even this will carry different meanings to different people. Rather than make assumptions in this space some sustainability analysts argue that the best way forward is to engage the people through deliberative democracy and find out what they think are acceptable definitions, goals and targets.

Add to that the difficulties involved if you seek an overall measure of well-being that considers all three sets of objectives together and not just now but also when the future is taken into account as well. The conceptual and measurement issues are such that many say it is too hard a task and we are best to make a judgment call on how the three goals, properly measured, are coming together at any time to produce acceptable or unacceptable community-wide results.

In Western Australia's Hope for the Future a distinction is made between "Foundation Principles" and Process Principles". The former relates to that which we seek (for example long term economic gain, biodiversity and ecological integrity, and settlement efficiency and quality of life amongst others) and the latter on how we expect issues to be tackled and decisions made. What we call "due process" is strengthened and its reach expanded to include the principles of integration, accountability, transparency and engagement, and precaution. That means seeking "mutually supportive benefits with minimal tradeoffs", information on a "triple bottom line" basis, "public engagement" and "caution" when assessing risks. All of this raises the level of accountability for politicians and non-elected public officials- and significantly so.

When it comes to the foundation principles sustainability is also a demanding project. Inevitably in our system of electoral democracy parties will represent interests in civil society and may find it hard to go to the bigger picture. Add to that the wide range of pressure groups outside Parliament and with a commitment to and the resources for campaigning. So too are there value-based politicians and movements who are of a fundamentalist persuasion, be they libertarians, socialists or communitarians. They believe they know- in advance- what is best and they work on our hearts as well as our minds to garner support.

They know too how to divide and rule.

Conclusion

This is the real world of politics within which the principle and practice of sustainability has to operate. It has active enemies and it requires thinking and acting beyond our traditional commitments. Leadership to that end is crucial if it is to survive. Not surprisingly some say it's a mission too bold, I say it's a project worth pursuing.