

Over-tempered radicalism?

As we write this note, the G8 Summit of the leaders of the industrialised world has gathered and dispersed, haggling over the spoils they will take from a world economic system in need of serious overhaul. Mark Everard and Paul Johnston reflect on events and call for a less tempered attitude towards sustainable development.

Take climate change ...

Sadly, the pantomime performed as grown-up drama at the G8 Summit at Gleneagles is one repeated with monotonous regularity at all scales, the world over. Take, for example, the periodic fights across Europe over how many cod each nation demands by right from stocks already exploited beyond sustainable limits, as if the environmental and economic disaster of the collapse of the Grand Banks fishery was mere fiction. Perhaps George W Bush deserves the most dishonourable mention for heroically myopic world statesmanship, declaring on the very eve of the G8 Summit that he would not commit the US to any climate change measure that might harm the US economy. Is it mere cynicism to note that his is, in fact, an economy powered by gross over-consumption with its head firmly in the sand about looming global oil shortages?

After all, is there really a problem?

Take climate change. The evidence suggests emphatically that there is. So how come it is possible to remain so blissfully ignorant? Climate change has rocketed up the global agenda in a matter of twenty years, from the fringes of scientific speculation into a mainstream supported by the consensus of virtually all credible scientists across the globe. If we are looking for subject matter for the next 'War of the Worlds' movie, we surely have it. Not human versus Martian. Instead, humans versus the consequences of human actions that we now know to be short-sighted, reinforced by vested interests intransigent to the need for action in the face of overwhelming evidence. All this supported, moreover, by a cast of billions of unwitting 'extras'.

Yet the news media, in the interests of 'balanced reporting', are generally able to wheel out at least one dissenting view (don't ask who pays his or her grant money) to counter the claims of the mass of climate change proponents. This, wilfully or otherwise, effectively stifles public alarm about an issue that should not only be exceedingly alarming, but which should also act as an immediate muster to action and innovation.

Would that climate change, of a probable significance beyond our collective capacity to imagine, were the 'be all and end all' of our problems! But there is more; so much more.

... and MEA

Take, for example, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment,

or MEA. "The what?" you might ask. The MEA was five years in the making, involving the aggregated research of 1,300 scientists from 95 countries across the world. Its conclusions are striking, underlining emphatically that humans have changed the world more rapidly over the last fifty years than during any other time in history, whilst billions of people remain in poverty. Our collective global contribution to the liquidation of the natural world threatens to derail the United Nations' goals to halve poverty and hunger by 2015.

Sponsored and supported by the full weight of the United Nations, the MEA was published in March 2005 to a deafening fanfare of inertia from the world's press and political leadership. This in spite of the stark warning it offered to the world, a picture underpinned by robust science and a consensus of global scientists. It put numbers on the 'overshoot' of the demands that industrialised society places upon the finite supportive capacities of global ecosystems, and defined the breaking points that these self-same ecosystems have reached at our hand. This is not of course 'news'. Firstly, it endorses the long-standing position of many NGOs in cataloguing the decline of global ecosystems and the spiralling demands of modern society upon them. Add to this the findings of the long-running series of UNDP 'Human Development Reports'. These clearly describe the impacts of inequitable sharing of wealth and power, and the implications of systematic environmental degradation for peoples both poor and rich. Secondly, the MEA is hardly the riveting social commentary of 'Big Brother' or the eye-popping visuals of the latest Page Three, so will it really interest the punters enough to grab their attention?

Is anyone actually doing anything?

And here lies another rub. We have a system of global leadership, in the form of the United Nations, and press freedom that, in theory, reflects matters of great public interest and importance. The global institution of the UN is stronger today, more independent and (at least where funding nations are not in default) able to undertake authoritative research and analysis. This can help guide those charged with our future to navigate through what are, by any reasonable metric, exceedingly turbulent waters. But what if the leaders don't want to listen? What if the media that serves them is deaf to the big picture, and to the rational concerns of the public mind? Where, in short, is there any true leadership in the face of unambiguous and overwhelming evidence of severe impending impacts upon human wellbeing and future potential?

Maybe the eight most powerful men in the world, when they met at Gleneagles, spoke eloquently of the very future of the world whose wellbeing is in their hands, yet cast a blind eye to practical agreement and action. Commitment to a new

dialogue on climate change does, after all, sound good whilst deferring action over the last round of binding agreements. Maybe their over-riding preoccupation, beyond the rhetoric, was to bicker over the remaining fry in a global pond already fished to the very edge of its capacities for self-renewal. Maybe satisfying the greed of the current generation was the paramount concern, notwithstanding the inevitable consequence: undermining of the right of future generations to realise their potential. Surely this can't be the real scenario?

Legacies and passion

So what is the way forward? If we can't appeal to foresight and reason, perhaps we can remind our leaders of the legacies they will leave. History may find the rhetoric of "Bulkhead against those that presume to threaten the freedom of the western world" to be little more than "Terrorist who emplaces short-term nationalist interests in the way of renewable technologies and social equity at inter-continental and inter-generational scale". Doesn't "Champion of the technologies that give all an equitable and non-polluting stake in the future" sound so much better than "Oppressor of nations and innovations that threaten the old regime of 'black gold' and the bully-boy ethos of 'might is right'"? Will the epitaph read "Champion of the freedom of all people" or else "Oppressor of the rational concerns of decent people who wonder about the future on behalf of themselves and their kids"? In short, "True global leader", or "Suppressor of rational debate that might destabilise vested interest"?

We need to get passionate about this, to bear witness, to express concern, to raise voices to demand a sustainable future. We need to demonstrate to our leaders that we have no stomach for vested historic interests eking out the past to extract the maximum short-term profit at whatever long-term cost. Sustainability ever was regarded as a subversive concept, capable of destabilising conventional interests, inverting the power balance from economic to eco-centric, and raising the interests of the many onto a level playing field with a privileged few. But how often do you see that paradigm-changing potential articulated and expressed so plainly today? More importantly, where is the broad spectrum of practical actions that will deliver steady progress towards a sustainable society?

From tempered environmentalism ...

Environmentalists have come a long way indeed from placard-waving roots. In the 1970s, the issues that brought us onto the streets – rainforests, seal clubbing, rocking against racism, nuclear disarmament and whaling to name but a few – were alien to the business and government psyche of the time. By overt demonstrations of public disaffection and robust commentary, we changed the agenda, got those issues in to the mainstream. Global conferences, conventions and other agreements followed. Slowly, slowly, 'the environment' and ethical issues shifted from the margins into political rhetoric and then later, much later, the mainstream of political and governance discourse.

By the mid-1990s, the language of 'sustainable development' was in the mainstream. Today, sustainability is a common, albeit often token, name-check in corporate and national reporting. Is this the real progress, the goal that we fought for way back then? To achieve the goals we set ourselves, we on the margins learned the language of 'tempered radicalism'. We learned how to bring grassroots fears and concerns to boardroom tables and government

dialogue. We learned that to continue to antagonise was to block progress once we had helped the issue get its metaphorical 'foot in the door'. We learned to speak the language of stakeholder concern, liability and economic signals, 'supping with the devil' in the interests of affecting the mainstream of public consciousness, policy, incentive and compulsion, and, eventually, action.

So now we are here. Exposed to all the pre- and post-Gleneagles posturing and corporate reporting on sustainability, is the journey complete? The only honest answer is a heart-felt and impassioned 'no'! There is something so safe, so saccharine, about the general tone of corporate and governmental dialogue that leaves us wondering exactly where on the long journey we lost our bite.

... to science and urgency...

One metaphorical cheer for that progressive mainstreaming of sustainability concepts. As to the two 'missing cheers', what happened to the horrific 'here and now' reality of

"...where is the broad spectrum of practical actions that will deliver steady progress towards a sustainable society?"



Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment

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Stepping Stones

unsustainability that used to get us out of bed in the morning (or possibly the early afternoon... many of us were students in those days)? Is the concept so safe, so anodyne, that it is no longer capable of making us reach out to the nation's soul on behalf of our children and their children?

'Sustainable development' is a journey, from our current acceleration into the buffers towards a new goal in which the living systems that support us have a long-term future and we have the continued opportunity to realise our potentials. But the urgency of embarking on that journey, and the pace at which we have to accelerate progress if we are to avert or, more realistically, to minimise the horrendous and inevitable effects of unsustainability is often overlooked, hidden by fine rhetoric. If we use science to guide us, to reveal to ourselves the magnitude of the challenge and to identify long-term solutions, then the quest for sustainability should be the most urgent race for current generations, and possibly of our entire history.

And yet those two words, 'sustainable development', whilst inherently so powerful, are also so easily subverted by omitting issues of pace and scale from our PR- and voter-friendly pronouncements. By using the same words without substantive targets based on real facts, we see the ultimate perversion of the concept. In its emergence into the mainstream, the term 'sustainable development' has been hijacked and sanitised by the very vested interests it sought to address. From over-arching, epoch-defining paradigm to oxymoron in one easy linguistic step.

So, the radicalism beneath all of our cultured tempering should be reapplied to seize back concepts of sustainability from those who have bent them, whether to serve narrow interests or for fear of the scale of change that it implies.

...and a renewed call to action

When we have replaced the backbone in the definition, re-energising it with purpose and urgency and also supporting it with the flesh and blood of real action to deliver unambiguous and ambitious targets, then we will have reclaimed this vital concept. We will have sounded the defining rallying cry of our age, and re-sharpened a tool that we can all use meaningfully and decisively.

And if we don't do this within the next ten years? Then our legacy to future generations will be continued extinction of natural resources and supportive capacities beyond critical minima, impacts upon the climate of massive consequence, deepening geopolitical destabilisation, and progressive erosion of our collective capacity to realise our potential. Is this something that we will be happy to live with, or to force others so to do?

If we can not do it for our children, as we used to protest all those years back, then surely we can do it for ourselves? After all, these many years down the line, we have the children (and sometimes grandkids too) on behalf of whom we said we were doing it. Furthermore, society's collective unsustainability is not only affecting our offspring today (though we take no

satisfaction in knowing that we said it would) but also eroding our own pensions, health and personal security as we speak. We are embedded, or perhaps half-embalmed, in that future that we spoke of so eloquently before we turned grey or bald.

We may have tempered our passions to get into the mainstream, but has our tempering delivered us into the doldrums? We are unquestionably more sophisticated now, armed with the science, economic argument and legal implication that offers a bedrock of evidence that should be so persuasive to policy-makers.

We are not the 'greeny' extremists we were once portrayed to be, seen as empty vessels making a lot of noise, but have precipitated a social revolution of enormous, as yet latent, import. The task now is to engage with real vigour and commitment upon a journey that has at least been recognised, albeit that it is more generally described and applied today in safe 'package holiday' language.

The authors hope that they are unduly pessimistic about the probable long-term outcomes of the recent G8 Summit. Certainly, this gathering of leaders of the developed world was deeply overshadowed by the terrible events in London, cynically timed, it seems, to coincide with the meeting itself. Nonetheless, media attention upon the pan-global Live 8 concerts and of the issues of climate change and poverty will hopefully have been a positive influence. We have also been given reason to reflect upon perpetuating the exclusion of the many from the luxuries available to the few. Perhaps we may even see elements of true global leadership emerge through the smoke and mirrors of polite nationalist bickering.

Perhaps the reality, simply, is that we shall see an interim position that reinforces the privileges of the few whilst casting a sop to the marginalised. But, whatever we see, for God's sake let's get passionate, whether ecstatic or angry, and a whole lot less tempered about its implications for the future and our capacity to advance an agenda for global improvement.

If we let a severe dose of over-tempering blunt our raw cutting edge, or blind us to the once-only chance that remains to evolve from the dying world order that stands between us and a sustainable future, we will be doing the greatest disservice in human history. Not only to our children and our descendants. No, to ourselves and our own responsibility in this pregnant moment of history.

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