
The Challenge of Sustainability

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Where to start with my talk? Perhaps a good way would be to adopt the following recommendation: “Think big” and all that entails when it comes to public policy. What’s happening in the world today and how do we need to respond? Accept that good public policy requires the coming together of different but equally important objectives. Both intellect and its judgment and the social sciences and their evidence are needed. In this respect. Note too, the wisdom contained within an editorial from the **Times of London**:

“... governments overestimate their influence today and underestimate it in the long term.”

Looking in from the outside I can see your all-important plan for net zero and how you intend to achieve it. You have your responsibility to deliver land for industry and neighbourhoods for people. The two do not always fit together in a seamless way. What we see in your work is a microcosm of a bigger story – humankind’s need to bring into being a plan and deliver it in the interests of our environment and society as well as our economy. Technology is necessarily part of the story but so is human behaviour and the habits we have developed. That takes us to the all-important role of public engagement, scenario planning and collaborative government. The trust we are losing needs rebuilding, as does a policy programme that is relevant, feasible and supportable by stakeholders and the public. Let me explain but first I’ll speak a little of my beliefs.

Idealism and Realism

I've been very fortunate in my working life. It's been a wonderful mix of what we might call "theory" and what we might call "practice". Fifty per cent of my time seeking **to understand and interpret the world** in academia here and overseas and fifty per cent on seeking to **shape and change it through the "art" of electoral and parliamentary politics**.

In this mix both **idealism** and **realism** matter. We need "the light on the hill" and the values that charge it up. The French Revolution gave us some clarity in this respect – the motto of **liberty, equality and fraternity** they wrote – and still reflect upon today. Wherever there's a government building the motto is there and it matters to the French, a statement of values to guide them.

There's so much in this – **the freedom of the individual** with restrictions only where the exercise of freedom involves harm to others.

Then there's **equality** for all and the doing away of privilege, any social distinctions requiring the justification of the public good. Certainly, it meant Public Offices **open to all**.

Finally, there's **fraternity** and the strength and commitment required to defend the revolution against monarchism and the aristocracy. Revolution and counterrevolution, the two go together and for the French revolutionaries that meant sticking together, unity and strength in the face of opposition.

This takes us to the great debates about "**means**" and "**ends**" in politics. So too of the debates about "**revolution**" and "**reform**". This is what I would label high-level philosophising about the type of mix – liberty, equality and fraternity – that best promotes community well-being.

Inevitably it becomes a debate about **liberalism, socialism** and **communitarianism** each playing out in relation to **nationalism** and **environmentalisms**.

Liveability, Wellbeing and Sustainability

About these things I've devoted some of my thinking and a big chunk of my practice. It takes you to a discussion of human rights and the types of liberty/equality mixes that best produce the common good. Not so today this discussion but rather an approach built around "**liveability**", "**well-being**" and their engine room of "**sustainability**". As you would be aware working out what the latter should mean for public policy was a priority for my government, culminating in the report **Hope for the future: the Western Australian State Sustainability, Strategy** (September 2003). Sustainability was defined as "meeting the needs of present and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity".

Note the focus here – "**present**" and "**future**" generations, "**integration**" and "**needs**". The traditional political philosophy approach is on the relationships needed between **law** and society whereas the sustainability agenda brings with it an account **people** in society. This takes me to the definitions:

Liveability involves "qualitative and quantitative factors across five categories – stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure.

(Economist Intelligence Unit)

Well-being "refers to a state of being healthy, happy and comfortable, both physically and mentally. It encompasses a sense of contentment and satisfaction with your life, and a positive outlook on your personal and professional experiences.

(Wellbeing people)

Rather than look to the mixes of liberty, equality and fraternity we concern ourselves with the results of the different mixes of economy, society and the environment. It's argued that **subjective** as well as **objective** factors need to be taken into account – and that government should be seen as an **enabler** of well-being; nothing more and nothing less,

there being recognition that people in communities themselves also need to be the drivers of well-being.

Saying this leads me to commend your agency for its use of the United Nations' **Sustainability Development Goals** (SDGs) in its reporting. So too your use of the **Global Reporting Initiative** (GRI) that helps businesses and others to take responsibility for the impacts of their endeavours. Research has found that GRI Standards remain the most widely used sustainability reporting standards in the world.

It's so important for governments and businesses to **reference themselves internationally**, this being not just a good principle when it comes to overall assessment of progress but also because the issue of climate change hangs over us all as a truly global concern.

Types of Growth

I trust you would agree that we now know a lot more about sustainability assessment – and which government and community initiatives can make a difference. This is, of course, the other part of “theory” when it comes to public policy. What works and what doesn't work?

There is, for example, loads of evidence that urban sprawl has a range of negative environmental and health consequences, and “smart growth” may be a better option. Its defined as “a policy framework that promotes an urban development pattern characterised by high population density, walkable and bikeable neighbourhoods, preserved green spaces, mixed-use development (development projects that include both residential and commercial uses), available mass transit and limited road construction”. Note it has elements of, but is different from the concept of “**garden suburbs**”, because it addresses the issues of population density and transport as well.

We would like to think that the evidence and politics around all of this was clear-cut. But it isn't, there being strong voices - and interests - hostile to what has been described as "**new urbanism**" and "**smart growth**". Like most public policy there will be controversy, especially when a new-style residential development is planned to replace that of an old-style development. It might relate to concerns regarding property values and housing costs more generally, restrictions on land use and disruption of lower density, quiet and non-commercial.

The Three Questions

It follows that we need to ask **three** and not just **one** question when considering policy. The first: "Is it relevant?" and "is there **evidence** it can achieve what was said of it?" All too often policy makers see this as the beginning and end of public policy making but in fact we need also to ask: "Is the **physical and human infrastructure** available to ensure its implementation?" Add to this, is the public service properly prepared for delivery?"

Then there is the final question: "Does it have **adequate support** amongst stakeholders and the general public?" If not, how should the issue be handled?

My message from all of that is: "Think **policy**, think **evidence**, think **deliverability** and think **support**?"

There's also that crucial issue of **context**, be it intellectual or practical. Context creates potential constraints on what is possible in one place as opposed to another. As it changes so do we have to respond. As a result of economic transformation, new technology and power shifts globally, our organisation will be challenged. The goals may have to be changed, the training for implementation altered and the means of engaging the public upgraded and intensified.

The Future

The Canadian social scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon reminds us that “the future's precise contours” can’t be known today. Why is that? Because, as Homer-Dixon points out, history is sensitive to “chance, to fate, to the whims of leadership, and to the unexpected advent of new technologies”.

I do note, however, that it is “precise contours” to which he refers, it's not that we should not concern ourselves with such projections. Quite the contrary, we do need a sense of what the future will (or can) hold for us negatively as well as positively. We can't just let change run us over, we need to shape the future itself through the interventions we make today.

One of the most constructive ways to plan is via **scenario building**, the creation of “holistic integrated images of how the future may evolve” and then putting that image (and others) alongside our organisation and how it operates. It's a case of asking “what if”.

It will require in-depth thinking and investigation to work out which of the scenarios are most relevant to our organisation. If we get it right, we will be in a better position to manage. There are so many things happening that are of relevance. However, some stand out such as:

- geo-political and economic uncertainty,
- climate change,
- new technology,
- the demography of ageing,
- growing inequality, and
- a loss of trust in government.

The storms, fires and floods we've seen on display in recent times are a wake-up call but a strategic approach to government would call upon us all to better plan for the likelihood that they may be more common, a new reality for us all. It's that “what if” question that only a properly conducted scenario planning exercise can answer – and not just when it

comes to infrastructure but also what the public may think about the legislative and regulatory aspects. However much we may wish to focus on technological fixes – as important as they are – we can't ignore that “people dimension”. Which brings us to interests, the “here and now” and the fear of change. We do need to know what our community is willing to digest – and if it's problematical how we can ensure change is possible.

Think of it this way. All agile and progressive organisations should have scenario planning in its kit box of options when considering the future. In that kit box should be the options available to ensure we properly engage with stakeholders and the wider public. In saying this I acknowledge your own work in the field and its recognition that “each project is unique with its own planning, environmental and other approval requirements”.

Types of Engagement

But, back to my kit box. Remember that the ways a government can engage are many and varied, each with its own rationale, ranging from straightforward information provision, to consultation, to partnerships to delegation to community control itself. It's just important to be clear to the relevant stakeholders about the aim of the exercise. It may be to provide information and consult but no more. On the other hand, it may be a random selected citizen assembly commissioned to make recommendations or, in fact, to make policy itself. You may remember the 2003 **Dialogue with the City**, involving 1,100 participants to draft up a planning framework for the Perth Metropolitan Area. One third were randomly selected, one third invited stakeholders and one third self-nominated to attend. The final result was “**Network City; A Community Planning Strategy**”.

The Trust Factor

In engaging the public, it is so important that you make your objectives clear to participants. If there are assumptions involved say so, **don't say one thing** (“we want your views”) **but mean another** (“we want your views but only in respect of implementation, the policy itself is non-negotiable”). In saying this I note the “**trust factor**” in modern politics and it's not just about the people lacking trust in government but governments lacking trust in the people. As Aline Muylaert put it: “Public sector trust goes both ways”. She goes on to say that “community engagement is the key to building back trust between communities and their governments, and yet many public servants are still apprehensive about delving into deeper engagement and the public is still wary of whether participating will have any impact”.

Yes, we need strong government but one that works within a “culture of engagement”. That means (1) **ambition** from elected officials and management, (2) good **internal organisation**, and (3) **skills and resources**.

Organisation and Resources

The organisation issue has become central as governments seek to solve complex problems. Such problems cross departmental boundaries and can't be addressed in a world of public sector siloes. This brings collaboration and joined-up government to the table and as an ANZSOG paper has put it:

Collaboration is frequently fraught and costly. Interagency collaboration consists of ongoing negotiation which has significant coordination costs compared to the efficiency of a simple hierarchy. Imperfect alignment of collaborative goals introduces the risk of some parties opportunistically pursuing individual goals. Even when collaboration is successful, the transaction costs tend to be high.

Again, it is important that governments make it clear what it is that they seek from their public sector. If agencies are to think beyond their normal limits, they need to know that a common good is being created. That common good needs definition or collaboration may just finish up as one agency versus another, power factors determining who comes out on top.

All too often we see collaboration in **system** terms, the inter-departmental meetings we arrange and the information we share but not so much in **people** terms, **who** is put in the chair, **how members relate** to each other and **listen** or otherwise. Think too about the end of the meeting. Have any matters been fully settled? Are the terms of any agreement clear to all? I loved the fact that these are the very issues, amongst others, that will be your focus over the next few days.

Concluding Remarks

These sorts of questions have become increasingly important as we discover the need for joined-up government if results are to be achieved in terms of well-being and liveability. All agencies need to be on board – and in partnership with stakeholders and the community. One way to think about it – and manage it – is to think of a project and how to manage it. In this regard I've always found the British document **The Strategy Survival Guide** published by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in 2004.

So much easier it was when everything was so compartmentalised around clearly defined functions and powerful public service chiefs. **Now it's a case of partnering within and without, above and below. Not one thing or the other, but both.** It's the world of sustainability and all that it has to offer, if only it was easier to achieve!

APPENDIX

How do we decide? Put **all** options on the table.

- Advisory Committees & Boards,
- Charette,
- Citizen Advisory Committees,
- Citizen Juries,
- Citizen's Panels,
- Future Search Conference,
- Open Days/Exhibitions,
- Public Meetings,
- Public Submissions,
- Small Neighbourhood meetings,
- Staff Feedback and suggestions,
- Surveys/Questionnaire,
- Complaints,
- Community Workshops,
- Consensus Conference,
- Deliberative Opinion Polls,
- e-Engagement,
- Face-to-face interviews,
- Focus groups.