

Struggling against ‘Sustainable Development’ A Canadian Perspective

“Explicit efforts to save particular species will be possible for only relatively few of the more spectacular or important ones. Agonizing as it will be to make such choices, planners need to make conservation strategies as systematically selective as possible.”
Our Common Future, p.164.

The concept of sustainable development, and the assumptions on which it rests, are today perhaps the most important government and business theoretical justification for continued industrial expansion – and in the process, the eventual destruction of the Earth.

Most importantly, the embracement of sustainable development marks the defeat of the “limits to growth” thesis – the basic idea that the Earth is finite and in such a finite world there have to be limits to growth. Now, with sustainable development, there are no limits to growth.

While there have been a number of dissenting voices in the Canadian debate, sustainable development as a frame of reference has been adopted by many environmentalists, by green parties, and by many on the left – see Carolyn Merchant’s 1992 book **Radical Ecology: The Search for a Liveable World** – and by many in the alternative movements. This terminology has widespread currency in Canada and in the United States, e.g., **Everyone’s Backyard**, November/December 1993 issue, publication of the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste. Why is this?

Even Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who articulated the original deep ecology position, in a 1988 article in the Canadian periodical **The Trumpeter**, personally endorsed sustainable development:

A world conservation strategy implies acceptance of sustainable development. Such development is, or should be, implicit in the programs of Green parties and the visions of Green societies.

Yet, I believe the eight-point **Deep Ecology Platform**, which in so far existing “authorized” formulations has not included sustainable development, is an important part of the theoretical way forward. **The Platform**, however, needs a strong social justice infusion, drawing inspiration from a left/socialist tradition. Such a deep ecology and social justice synthesis could provide a philosophical alternative to the Brundtland dead end. It would be socially and economically community-based, radically democratic, and consciously defined in opposition to the capitalist market and the state. It obviously would require shedding of some beliefs and a “greening” of traditional left views. It would express a biocentric or non human-centered new relationship to nature, offering a real sustainable path forward. One tentative name for such a theoretical synthesis, rooted in nature and social justice, is “socialist biocentrism”.

It is only a minority who openly articulate in their work opposition to sustainable development, although this is perhaps a “developing” trend! See, for example, the summer 1993 issue of the B.C. bioregional publication **The New Catalyst**, “Great Global Greenwash or The Sustainable Development Scam”; and the July/August 1992 Special Issue of **The Ecologist**, the leading green theoretical journal, “Whose Cannon Future?”

The wide embracement of the concept of sustainable development, which has drawn its main legitimation and definition from the 1987 United Nations report **Our Common Future**, by The World Commission on Environment and Development (popularly referred to as the Brundtland Report and Commission), in my view is an extremely significant planetary turning point.

The basic definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Report is human-centered, vague, and contains the two seemingly contrasting terms “sustainable” and “development”:
Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs.

In looking at the sustainable development literature, the above definition has proved to be quite accommodating. Business often speaks of “sustainable economic development”, while greens and environmentalists, who swim in the same shark school, sometimes speak of “ecologically sustainable development”, or “socially just and ecologically sustainable development”.

Practically, for countries pursuing sustainable development, it has come to mean paying some attention to environmental matters, but from the viewpoint of maintaining a growth economy. It was felt that some environmental issues had to be addressed, because existing economic practices were undermining the future prospects for growth. Hence there are more environmental regulations and more intervention by the state in the capitalist market with a sustainable development economy.

“Protecting” the environment in this sense, is also a growth industry which has spawned many new “environmental” and cleanup businesses, and offered many opportunities for “consulting” environmental firms. A number of former mainstream environmentalists in Canada have graduated to their own consulting firms serving corporations and business. These former environmentalists can provide the inside knowledge on how to manage or quell community-based dissent about some “development” project, so necessary to the government or corporate developer.

Rio

The Rio June 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), showed the dominance of sustainable development. The government documents which came out of UNCED, **Agenda 21**, **Statement of Forest Principles**, **The Rio Declaration**, **The Convention on Biodiversity**, and **The Framework Convention on Climate Change**, reflect this world view. The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development was established after the Earth Summit, as a promotional vehicle. In a global sense, sustainable development has

thus come forth to undermine the worldwide ecology movement's threat to global multinational business and national governments.

At the Rio Global Forum (the NGO alternative to UNCED), about 15 of the Alternative NGO Treaties, out of a total of about 36, used in some way the language of sustainable development. While some Treaties used the conceptual perspective of sustainable development, others made use of the term but without the worldview of the Brundtland Report. This was possible because business and government interests, although present, did not normally dominate the alternative treaty-making process at the Global Forum. One NGO Treaty, appropriately the very progressive **Treaty on Alternative Economic Models**, declared its "autonomy from both the market and the state" and specifically opposed the Brundtland model of sustainable development. The NGO **Forest Treaty**, which I participated in elaborating, excluded sustainable development from the language used, after internal discussion.

Sustainable development language was used for the **Final Statement of the First Earth Meeting of Greens in Rio de Janeiro**, which was the product of a two-day meeting just prior to the opening of the Global Forum. Jim Bohlen, a member of the B.C. and federal Green Party, signed on with the Canadian endorsement to this Statement. At this meeting, Greens in the European Parliament distributed a document called Green Agenda, specifically prepared for UNCED, which was very supportive of sustainable development. Chapter 2 of this **Green Agenda** is called "Transition from a Debt Economy to a Sustainable Development Economy". I was one of two members of the Green Web taking part as observers and movement greens at the Greens Meeting in Rio.

Pre-Brundtland in Canada

Canada had been using the terminology of sustainable development since the publication of the 1980 **World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development**. Canada embraced this Strategy of sustainable development. The World Wildlife Fund, which has advertised itself as providing "a bridge for the conservation movement to the business community", was one of three groups involved in producing this **Strategy**, thus showing an early, and continuing, involvement in the selling of sustainable development.

The Canadian federal minister of the environment in October of 1981 put out a press release stating:

The **World Conservation Strategy** points the way to sustainable economic and social development based on the wise use of renewable resources. It also suggests ways to improve or maintain environmental quality.

In the 1986 **State of the Environment Report for Canada**, the federal government explicitly endorsed the sustainable development orientation of the **World Conservation Strategy**, and noted:

The aim of the **Strategy** was to help advance the achievement of sustainable development through the conservation of living resources.

However, the **World Conservation Strategy** was not successful in making sustainable development a widely used concept in Canada. It was the publication of the Brundtland Report which did this. Given the above, it is perhaps not surprising that it was Canada which originally proposed at the United Nations the setting up of the World Commission on Environment and Development, out of which came **Our Common Future**. There were 23 Commissioners involved in producing the Report. They came from 21 different nations and, after three years work, presented an unanimous, almost 400-page report. Two Canadians had influential roles in the World Commission: Maurice Strong, who played such a crucial role in the Rio 1992 Earth Summit, was one of the Commissioners, and Jim MacNeill, who was Secretary General and ex-officio member. Canada strongly supported the work of the World Commission and six public hearings were held across the country. Looking at the Canadian participants listed as contributing to the Commission's work, through submissions or participating in the public hearings, it can be seen that most of the participants were part of the establishment – politicians and government bureaucrats, industry spokespersons, academics, consultants, etc. Very few grassroots environmentalists took part.

Canada and the Brundtland Report

In Canada, anyone who is concerned about environmental ethics, wilderness, wildlife, parks, land use, oceans, forestry, or any aspect of environmental protection, has to come to terms with the concept of sustainable development. All these concerns are now expressed by most government and corporate spokespersons using this language and perspective.

The Canadian government's 1990 **Green Plan**, a blueprint for mainstream environmentalism, uses the language of sustainable development, e.g. forestry means shifting "the management of our forests from sustained yield to sustainable development" – that is an expanded cut – and argues for "market-based measures" for protecting the environment. This **Plan** holds out the false promise that "development", i.e. economic growth and environmental protection or sustainability, can be reconciled.

In Canada, environmental indicators are chosen to illustrate the sustainable development perspective that economic growth can continue along with environmental protection. Thus graphs put out by the federal agency Environment Canada on the pulp and paper industry, show falling figures for BOD (biochemical or biological oxygen demand) and TSS (total suspended solids), and rising production for pulp and paper. The obvious message to be conveyed is that growth can continue, while environmental degradation diminishes. However, the figures are very selective for this very polluting industry, which is also the main force behind forest destruction in Canada. The Environment Canada graphs do not normally include toxicity and, more importantly, do not convey the massive environmental degradation caused by the pulp and paper industry, through effluent, stack gases, sludge, industrial solid waste disposal and through the product itself. Many unknown chemical substances are still discharged by the pulp and paper industry, e.g. organochlorines.

In each province and territory, so called Round Tables, with back-up institutional services, have been established to promote sustainable development in land use decisions. Universities do

research and teach courses on applying sustainable development. We are told by government, corporate, and other ideological advocates of sustainable development, that we must seek “common ground”, “we are all in this together”, “finger pointing is over”, etc.

Many mainstream Canadian environmentalists, who are part of the Canadian Environmental Network (C.E.N.) (funded by the federal government), also sit at Round Tables and seek common ground, that is, class collaboration, with business, governments, organized labour, etc., in the pursuit of sustainable development. The federal government **Green Plan** explicitly states:

Government assistance will also be provided to ENGOs and other NGOs to support projects or services that are of particular value in helping to achieve sustainable development in Canada.

It becomes clear that the federal government, through its funding of the C.E.N., has directly promoted and used the mainstream environmental movement as a carrier for sustainable development. As part of its export of sustainable-development thinking, the Canadian government funded the Rio trip of the “Canadian Participatory Committee for UNCED”, comprised of an environment sector, a development sector, and indigenous organizations.

The Round Tables and other government sustainable development conferences have also served the further ideological function of making business and governments look “progressive” and above class interest. This makes it much more difficult for the public to see what is going on and the enormity of the change in basic values which are necessary for a sustainable planet. To bring about change, there needs to be awareness that there is a fundamental problem. Participation within the sustainable development promotional framework helps conceal that our Earth is dying, and what is required to change this situation.

Becoming Involved

I entered the public ‘sustainable development’ debate in Canada in January of 1989, by writing a letter to the editor of the British Columbia bioregional environmental publication **The New Catalyst**. My letter opposed a positive appraisal by Jim Bohlen of this concept, and the 1987 book **Our Common Future**. Bohlen, a co-founder of Greenpeace and influential in Green “Party” politics at the British Columbia and federal levels, had stated:

Our Common Future should be in every Green activist’s library if not on the bedside table. It is a guidebook for planetary survival that rationalizes Green politics.

(The **B.C. Green Party News**, Winter ‘87 issue, had carried a front page picture of the book **Our Common Future**, flanked by two Party Speakers.)

My letter critically appraised sustainable development in the context of what the Brundtland Report actually said, and concluded:

Let Brian Mulroney, Marcel Masse, Joe Clark and various governments around the world promote this report. This is one bandwagon greens have no place on.

Erica Foulkes of Vancouver, in the Fall 1989 issue of **The New Catalyst**, wrote in support of the above position:

When this book emerged, I was curious as to why Green-oriented people and publications were so unanimously and unhesitantly positive about a document produced by a collection of governments such as this.

David Lewis, an influential member of the B.C. Green Party, was later to lead a vigorous and creative campaign in that province against sustainable development.

Bohlen of course was not alone in his evaluation. Another positive and non-critical early review appeared in the Canadian academic environmental journal **Alternatives**, in the December/January 1987/88 issue. This journal, which seems mainly to be a publishing vehicle for academics teaching environmental studies and graduate students to cut their publishing teeth, has over the years remained a booster for sustainable development studies. The November/December 1993 issue of **Alternatives** carries a half-page advertisement for the Winnipeg-based International Institute for Sustainable Development, set up by the Mulroney Conservative federal government.

Nova Scotia Conference on Sustainable Development

In Nova Scotia, in October of 1989, the Green Web refused to participate in a conference organized by the Nova Scotia Department of the Environment, called “Building Partnerships For Environmentally Sound Development” and organized public opposition to this conference. A press release was issued, “‘Sustainable Development’ Means Expanded Environmental Destruction”, referred to by local and national media, which asked Nova Scotians to repudiate the conference and the concept of sustainable development. The press release noted that sustainable development should more correctly be called “ecopornography”, that is, prostituting the Earth for economic growth, regardless of environmental costs, despite claims to the contrary.

After giving a critique of the **Brundtland Report**, the press release asked Nova Scotians concerned about the destruction of our environment, what kind of “development” was ecologically sustainable? Clearly, much existing economic activity was destroying the natural world around us, as global warming, species extinction, ozone destruction, world-wide toxic contamination, rising sea levels, acid rain, etc., demonstrated for those who wanted to see. To have a truly sustainable economy, much of the economic activity in the polluting “developed” world had to be terminated, not further expanded and we had to move to a simpler, more ecologically frugal lifestyle. This, said the press release, plus a massive transfer of wealth from the so-called developed world to the so-called underdeveloped world, cancellation of third-world debts etc., were some of the real changes to be faced, if we wanted an environmentally sustainable future.

The press release stated that the conference was about promoting increased economic activity and noted:

A section of the environmental movement which is attending this conference has apparently been seduced by business and government into accepting that capitalist economic activity, which is inherently anti-ecological, being based on the

growth/expansion of capital and the promotion of mindless consumerism as part of this growth, can concern itself with environmental protection.

This public opposition to sustainable development in Nova Scotia was followed up by two long letters sent to all newspapers in the province, in December of 1989. They gave

- a) A critique of **Our Common Future**, and
- b) Put forward an alternative ecological vision to the **Brundtland Report**, to break the theoretical monopoly of the advocates of sustainable development, as the basis for a new green ethics and a new morality.

An eight-page pamphlet was also produced by the Green Web. It appeared in final form in February 1990, and was called **Sustainable Development: Expanded Environmental Destruction**.

Brundtland Critique

While there is much to learn from **Our Common Future** concerning the deterioration of the world environment and economic deprivation, the sustainable development perspective has to be rejected for the following reasons:

The Brundtland Report

- a. Emphasizes that economic growth is needed and advocates a five- to tenfold increase worldwide in manufacturing output.
- b. Accepts the ecologically destructive lifestyle of the “developed” world, and the Western economic model, as something to be sought by the rest of the world.
- c. Has a human-centered orientation; other species of animals and plants do not have value in their own right, but are considered “resources” for human use. There is no ethical challenge to a human-centered universe. Sustainable remains sustainable for humans.
- d. Considers ecology or ecological sustainability as not primary, but merely one among a number of factors to be considered in policy decisions.
- e. Accepts the elimination of some species and advocates that conscious choices be made by humans to this end.
- f. Accepts and projects a world population of 8.2 billion persons by the year 2025, whereas a sustainable planet for human and non-human species requires major human population reductions.
- g. Advocates the greater use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
- h. Does not call for a massive global transfer of wealth and for the cancellation of Third World debts.

The 12% Campaign

Chapter 6 of **Our Common Future**, “Species and Ecosystems: Resources for Development”, says that 12% of a country should be set aside as “protected space”. I believe that political, not

ecological, considerations settled on this percentage as “a representative sample of Earth’s ecosystems”, even though we are assured that “a consensus of professional opinion” – one footnote reference – supports this 12%.

In September of 1989, the World Wildlife Fund Canada, adopted the 12% as a national target in its Endangered Spaces campaign for Canada. The 12% was taken up in the **Green Plan** in 1990, and passed by all-party resolution in the federal parliament in June of 1991. The Green Web endorsed the Endangered Spaces campaign, but in a letter to WWF Canada, we protested against any use of this campaign to promote the **Brundtland Report**. Our letter said, that “the **Brundtland Report**, in its policy thrust, seriously erodes any concern, on a long term basis, for the protection of wilderness and wildlife”, and summarized our critique of the **Report**. We concluded by saying that 12% was only a start and asked, “What makes the **Brundtland Report** the authority on the area that should be left for wilderness?”

Conceptual Enclosure

More generally, the framework of sustainable development can bring with it a form of conceptual enclosure, culturally conditioned, which can highlight some realities and shut out others. When the life support systems of the planet are being destroyed, why does sustainability require “development”? What is “development”?

Where the industrial capitalist economy essentially determines the nature of society, development has come to mean economic growth, which is needed for the continuation of the industrial economy. For development to proceed, discontent with the existing ecological, social, and economic situation has to be induced. New wants must be generated. Thus a consumer culture to induce self-identity and dissatisfaction becomes a required part of the growth economy. Changing such an economy to a truly sustainable one means ending this consumer culture and creating a new base of self-identity for humans, which must include the well-being of the Earth. Deep ecology has addressed this urgent problem.

Development means “potential”, so that the existing situation becomes devalued. In indigenous societies, or in the true “commons” with its close bonding of social relationships, interactions with nature were reciprocal and earth-cyclical, not “developmental”, that is growth oriented. **The Ecologist** argues that for sustainable development to go ahead, the enclosure and destruction of existing commons throughout the world are necessary and underway. The challenge becomes “to reject development and reclaim the commons.” In non-developmental societies, humans did not wantonly exploit nature and then move on to the next destructive project. Humans were responsible and accountable to the local community for their actions.

Conclusion

Sustainable development is about sustaining development, i.e. economic growth, not sustaining the planet. However, from a business perspective, there are a number of problems:

- a. Environmentalists who participate in the sustainable development process often disagree with government and industry over what exactly constitutes sustainable development and whether or not a particular project is or is not an example of sustainable development. There is no absolute control by the developers, over language and image making. This can make for messy public disputes.
- b. Sustainable development requires “a lot more talking” and increased regulatory intervention, e.g. environmental assessments by the state. All of this adds increased costs and time delays for any corporate or government developer. Any activist knows that most “developments” ultimately go through, despite such delays. The developers control the generation of data, and most of the analysis of a particular Earth-destroying activity that is desired. Extreme free market proponents have never been enthusiastic about sustainable development. As world corporate competition intensifies, demands to cut out “frills” intensify, and the state intervention model of the **Brundtland Report** comes under increasing attack. Another factor in Canada is a diminishing publicly expressed support for environmental protection, because of feelings of personal insecurity due to high unemployment, increased state debts, cut-backs to state social programs, etc.
- c. Trade agreements to foster free or freer trade, e.g. NAFTA (the North America Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the United States and Canada) and GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) undermine environmental regulations enacted by national governments in the name of sustainable development as “impediments to trade”. A leaflet distributed at the Global Forum in Rio, “GATT vs. UNCED: Can Free Trade and Sustainable Development Coexist?”, conveys this sentiment. The leaflet in support of sustainable development was signed by three American groups – Rainforest Action Network, the Fair Trade Campaign, and the Environmental News Network, and a group from Brazil and one from Uruguay!

Given the above, there could be an evolution underway in “corporate environmentalism”, which is what sustainable development is. The “green” corporation has evolved from denial to sustainable development in its corporate rhetoric. Corporate environmentalism attempts to theoretically obscure the basic contradiction between the finiteness of the Earth, with natural self-regulating systems operating within limits, and the expansionary nature of industrial society, so that industrial expansion on a global scale can continue.

A newly emerging doctrine, “industrial ecology”, is being used to legitimate this expansion: Industrial ecology takes the pattern of the natural environment as a model for solving environmental problems, creating a new paradigm for the industrial system in the process.

This doctrine, which is already being disseminated by corporate spokespersons in Canada, was outlined in “Industrial Ecology: An Environmental Agenda for Industry”, by Hardin B.C. Tibbs, in **Whole Earth Review**, Winter 1992. With the widespread acceptance of Hardin’s analysis legitimating the world as is, business would have not only have economic but intellectual hegemony, unlike the situation with sustainable development.

This paper has argued that sustainable development promotes and yet conceals the destruction of our Earth. It is an orientation, really eco-capitalism, which accepts the existing global capitalist economic system, is human-centered considering other species essentially as fodder for the industrial maw, accepts population growth, and can offer no path to ecological, social, or economic sustainability. It may be unpalatable for some, but a de-industrializing strategy is a necessary component of the fight for a sustainable planet, which is fit for all species to live on.

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Some background: Organizing opposition to sustainable development has been a major focus of work I have been involved with in the environmental and green movements. It has also been a concentration in the publications of the Green Web environmental research group.

David Orton, Green Web, January 6, 1994.

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This article written at the request of Brian Tokar, author **The Green Alternative: Creating an Ecological Future**, and regular columnist for **Z Magazine**. It is to be part of a collection of essays, under the provisional title, “New Voices in the Ecology Movement”, for the **Quarterly Z Papers**.

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