

Environment and Heritage Committee  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

26 March 2006

**RE: Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter**

I am writing in response to your call for submissions to the above inquiry.

My area of interest in sustainability resides in the methods to facilitate the transition towards a sustainable future rather than what a sustainable future itself entails. Such transition will occur over decades and while Australia is moving in the right direction, there needs to be significantly more done to ensure that we set ourselves on the path towards a sustainable future. The Sustainability Charter has the potential to act as a major driving force for this. Below are a number of comments relating to the creation of the Sustainability Charter based on issues raised by the Discussion Paper:

1. Comprehension of sustainability

- a) The Sustainability Charter should recognise that existing definitions of sustainability, such as those found in the Brundtland Report, define the result of a sustainable future and not the ways to achieve it.
- b) The Sustainability Charter should recognise that 'sustainability' is seen as an idea that can be understood, and aspired toward, without a clearly prescribed definition.
- c) The Sustainability Charter should display an understanding of the continuous nature of sustainability and the ability of its definition to change with time to effectively capture the changing characteristics and capacities of Australia.
- d) This continuous nature of sustainability should be encouraged wherever possible through both initial evaluations based on existing sustainable criteria and ongoing re-evaluation carried out over time as these sustainability criteria evolve with changes in society.
- e) The criteria for sustainability against which such evaluations occur should be informed by the outcomes of each evaluation to ensure the effectiveness, and in that relevance, of the criteria in future evaluations.
- f) The variability of what is 'sustainable' throughout the world should be recognised. For instance, comparison and introduction of international practices should be encouraged only when they have been found to suit the unique nature of the Australian environment.
- g) Sustainability should not be treated in isolation, instead the integrated nature of sustainability should be encouraged within every aspect of Australian society and government.

h) The Sustainability Charter should continue to remain relevant by continual self-reflection and where needed, redefinition.

## 2. Evaluation of contemporary Australian society

a) The Sustainability Charter would ideally recognise that Australia, in its current situation, is not sustainable under any existing definition. This would allow:

i) A basis for the required evaluation and improvement of Australian society.

ii) Government to take an active role in directing changes by appropriately allocating the responsibility.

b) The need to critically re-assess the definitions of 'progress' and 'growth' should be encouraged throughout the Sustainability Charter.

i) This should be a prescribed shift for 'quality of life' increases over quantity accumulation.

ii) Particularly the phenomena of population growth and suburban expansion should be critically assessed by the Sustainability Charter.

c) The Sustainability Charter cannot make, nor support, the assumption that anything which was suitable in the past will be suitable now or in the future. Nor can any proposed alternative be assumed to be an improvement on the current situation.

d) Care must be taken to ensure that mistakes of the past are not repeated and that decisions made today do not become the mistakes of tomorrow.

e) The Sustainability Charter should recognise, where known, the differences and similarities between contemporary society and a sustainable future, thus defining the scale of the task still to be undertaken at any given time.

## 3. Should a sustainable charter consist of aspirational statements, set targets, or both?

a) The Sustainability Charter should be aspirational only to the point where it still remains relevant to Australian society.

b) Any targets that are defined should use a system of measurement that is consistent with contemporary environmental accounting tools and with the goals of the Sustainability Charter.

i) Environmental accounting tools include: Ecological Footprint Analysis, Carbon Equivalents, Embodied Energy, among others.

ii) Such environmental accounting tools, as with the Sustainability Charter itself, should be continuously re-evaluated to ensure their accuracy and effectiveness.

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4. What research will be needed to develop and support the Sustainability Charter?
- a) Research into methods to integrate sustainable thinking into current practices is central to the transition towards a sustainable future.
  - b) Methods which have been effective in certain areas should be evaluated and ways investigated to apply their principles to improve other, non-associated areas. Thus adding to the integrated nature of sustainability.
    - i) For instance, lessons learnt in the development of renewable energy technologies can be applied to further develop parts of the education system.
5. Can existing standards be applied to the sustainability charter?
- a) The Sustainability Charter should recognise that existing standards are an effective way of relating the complex nature of sustainability and environmental protection to the average consumer.
  - b) The Sustainability Charter should encourage making such standards more sustainably focused and should facilitate, where possible, a greater understanding of their significance.
  - c) The Sustainability Charter should assist in strengthening minimum standards to prohibit activities that have a negative affect upon Australia achieving a sustainable future.
  - d) The introduction of new standards should be encouraged by the Sustainability Charter that offer a way for consumers to make a more informed decision based on sustainable criteria than would otherwise be available.
    - i) Industry should be supported in adjusting to meet these standards
    - ii) The transition towards a sustainable future will result in the loss of some industries, the Sustainability Charter should accept this fact before any further action is taken.
6. Can the charter be framed in such a way to ensure that it can be integrated into all levels of government decision making?
- a) The Sustainability charter should not be framed to be integrated with the current decision making process. Rather the decision making process should be altered in order to accommodate the Sustainability Charter and the goals toward which it hopes to achieve.
  - b) At no point should the Sustainability Charter specifically avoid any aspect of the government process as this would undermine the fundamental integrated and cohesive nature of sustainability.
  - c) The Sustainability Charter should be supported by both sides of government and any bias towards any political party should be avoided.

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7. Could a Sustainability Charter be incorporated into national State of the Environment reporting?
- a) The Sustainability Charter has the potential to play a leadership role in the creation of new standards in State of the Environment reporting and should be encouraged where possible.
  - b) The continuous nature of sustainability should become an essential part of State of the Environment reporting to ensure that it remains a relevant exercise during the transition toward a sustainable future.
  - c) State of the environment reporting should critically evaluate the role of the Sustainability Charter in its creation process and if required make adjustments to ensure the effectiveness of their ongoing inter-relationship.
8. How should we measure the use of renewable energy?
- a) Any tool used to measure the use of renewable energy, as with any other energy source, should be inclusive of the entire life cycle costs, both economic and environmental, of each viable alternative and any existing technologies.
  - b) The Sustainability Charter should accept that at this point there is no definitively accurate method to measure the impact and benefits of any existing or proposed source of energy that enables an unbiased comparison.
  - c) The Sustainability Charter should encourage greater accuracy in environmental accounting tools to enable a fair comparison between existing technologies and proposed alternatives.
9. How do we encourage an increase in renewable energy use?
- a) The Sustainability Charter should encourage a wholistic approach to public education of energy sources and the facilitation of open and productive public consultation.
  - b) Environmental impacts of various lifestyle choices should be made more apparent and appropriate alternatives should be encouraged.
  - c) The Sustainability Charter should act as a tool to begin a process of restricting activities that prohibit Australia's transition toward a greater mix of renewable technologies with the existing infrastructure.
  - d) The internalisation of external costs should be encouraged by the Sustainability Charter when such action can create a level foundation upon which to compare the numerous options.
9. The Sustainability Charter should recognise that, as in nature, no one solution can solve every problem. There needs to be a balance of numerous methods and technologies working towards a sustainable future.

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10. The Sustainability Charter should address the need for considerably longer political perspective than existing government trends.
  11. The Sustainability Charter must ensure that the ideals of sustainability become part of every aspect of government decision making and Australian culture as a whole. Only when there is a cohesive approach can a sustainable society be created for future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry.

Sincerely,

Matthew Trigg