

10 April 2006

The Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage

Dear Sir/Madam

SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO A SUSTAINABILITY CHARTER

The development of a Sustainability Charter for Australia is an initiative of tremendous importance for current and future generations of Australians. Considering the rapidly accelerating negative impacts of global warming and the deteriorating health of our rivers, forests, wetlands, farmlands and environment generally the achievement of sustainability is an urgent task. Sustainability needs to be achieved within the lifespan of those who are already young adults. I would implore the Committee to tackle the challenge that it has been given with courage and vision. Both will be required in large measure for Australia to achieve sustainability within the time we have left.

The following comments on the Terms of Reference, on the Discussion Paper and on Sustainability Principles Generally are tendered on behalf of Save Our Suburbs (Ryde District). SOS is an organisation that arose originally from resident concerns over the rapidly deteriorating urban environment of Sydney. However, our focus has broadened and we now see the urgent need for sustainability to be achieved.

Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference recognise 5 'key elements of sustainability'. It is a matter of great concern that the two most important issues confronting Australia and the world have not been mentioned.

These are **Population** and **Global Warming**. It is nonsense to talk about any of the measures designed to achieve sustainability, such as reducing ecological footprints or reducing greenhouse gas emissions, if we do not address the issue of population growth.

The first item in Australia's Sustainability Charter should be:

Determine a long run sustainable population for Australia, based on the current state of the Australian environment and on existing technology.

A population target is essential to inform sustainable government policy in all areas of Australian life. The Committee must not shy away from the fact that Australia's population may already be above its long-term sustainable level. A sustainable population level must be based on existing technology, as to base a target on assumed future technologies that may not materialise might literally be suicide.

The second item on the Sustainability Charter should be:

Reduce Australia’s total Greenhouse Gas Emissions by 70% by 2050.

The figure of 70% has been used, as it is my understanding that this is the scientific community’s assessment of the minimum reduction that will be required in order to avert disastrous irreversible climate change. (refer to Tim Flannery, “The Weather Makers”)

It is stated that the Sustainability Charter will be **“based on measurable outcomes, over a certain period, with intermediate milestones”**. Having a measurement focus is strongly supported, as sound numerical measures, that are independently verifiable, are the only way to ensure that real progress is made.

A set of measures needs to be determined that will represent a targeted position of sustainability. This won’t be perfect on day one but the measures can be refined as our knowledge and understanding of what will be required to achieve a sustainable society grows. Baseline values representing where we currently stand need to be established as well as the future sustainable values of each measure. The gaps that exist should drive action to improve performance in each of the areas of sustainability being measured. For example, if current Australian carbon dioxide emissions are 600 million tons per annum, the sustainable target for 2050 might be 180 million tons.

The committee should not fall into the trap of measuring the progress of ‘projects’ or ‘activities’. Local government **State of the Environment Reports** are full of feel good stories about ‘projects’ and ‘activities’ but virtually devoid of hard measures on things such as air pollution levels over time, water quality over time, etcetera. These SOE Reports give the impression that things are improving when hard measures would show that many important elements of the environment in which we live are deteriorating. The only reason that people avoid sound numerical measures is to avoid accountability.

Discussion Paper

It is disappointing that the vacuous suggestion that ‘sustainability is a journey not a destination’ could find its way into the discussion paper. Sustainability should be viewed very much as a destination. It is a destination that we need to arrive at as soon as possible. The longer it takes for us to arrive at a position of sustainability the greater will be our depletion of non-renewable resources, the greater will be the degradation of the environment that supports life on earth, and the lower will be our ultimate sustainable population level and our standard of living.

Sustainable Cities Report – Recommendation 1

Key national targets must include a sustainable population level and a level of green house gas emissions that will avert disastrous irreversible climate change.

Sustainable Cities Report – Recommendation 2

All government policies whether old or new, whether affecting rural or urban environments, should be evaluated to determine whether or not they align with sustainability objectives.

Sustainable Cities Report – Recommendation 3

Talk of incentive payments and promoting State cooperation sounds like an agreement to fiddle while Rome burns. We only have one shot at achieving sustainability. Australia will need to be put virtually on a war footing in order to achieve sustainability in the time available. The Commonwealth needs the power to mandate State and Local Government action to achieve sustainability. There are many areas in which the Federal and State governments are currently failing the Australian people. Invariably these are areas where there are arguments over funding and state versus federal responsibility. Sustainability is too important to be allowed to become another political football to be kicked back and forth while no effective action takes place.

This issue should be tackled head on at the outset via constitutional change to give the Commonwealth all powers necessary to achieve sustainability.

National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development

While principles for ecologically sustainable development might have been enunciated 20 years ago there is little evidence that they have been applied in Australia. On the contrary there is evidence that Australian cities have become less and less sustainable. Sydney and Perth face water crises (that will not be solved by energy intensive desalination). There was no such crisis 20 years ago.

Sustainability will require a comprehensive rethink of the structure of our cities. We need to structure our cities so that homes and jobs are collocated. We need to preserve and indeed expand agricultural activity in the Sydney basin. We cannot afford to cover our market gardens in tar and concrete and to ship food from hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away. In many ways Sydney was more sustainable 40 years ago. Older neighbourhoods had corner shops and butchers within walking distance. Our current model of large remote shopping centres to which most people must drive is seriously flawed.

The traditional Australian home on a quarter acre block can become largely sustainable **now** using technology that exists **now**. Rainwater can be captured. Grey water and black water can be readily treated and used to irrigate gardens. Solar panels can be installed to generate electricity and to heat water. Improved design can deliver passive cooling and heating. Permaculture exponents have demonstrated that a quarter acre can provide much of the food required by a family.

On the other hand high-density developments are patently unsustainable. They require that all of the essentials of life: water, energy and food be 'imported'. Poor design and unshaded walls make these developments energy hungry to drive air conditioning to make them habitable. Developers have promoted the myth that high-density development increases public transport use and reduces car dependency. There is not one shred of evidence that this is true. On the contrary one only has to look at the massive traffic congestion that afflicts high-density areas to see that it is untrue. High-density developments might cram a lot of people into a small space but they have a huge ecological footprint.

The current NSW Government plan for the development of Sydney, the ‘City of Cities Plan’ is unsustainable. By focussing activity into a small number of large urban centres it will enshrine high levels of vehicle use. We need a plan for a ‘City of Villages’ and a plan that recognises that Sydney is probably already beyond its long-term sustainable population level.

Western Australia’s Sustainability Framework

Comments on the 7 Foundation Principles are as follows:

1. No comment
2. This is a restatement of the Precautionary Principle and is supported
3. No comment
4. This ‘principle’ is nonsensical. Government obsession with ‘growth’ as a panacea to all ills is part of the problem. It is one of the main reasons that our society is unsustainable. We can grow in terms of knowledge, culture, community and the many things that really enrich our lives but we cannot grow endlessly in terms of consumption of material goods. Saying that we have to have a growing economy so that we can fix the environment is putting the cart before the horse. All economic activity is dependent on the environment and the resources it provides. For many years Australia has financed a high standard of living by running down our natural assets, by paying dividends from our natural capital. This has to stop and the muddled thinking that puts the economy and growth ahead of the health of the environment has to be overturned.
5. This principle is as equally misguided as Principle 4. Having business operate not just in an ‘environmentally sound manner’ but ‘sustainably’ is what is important. If business can at the same time remain internationally competitive well and good. However, if other countries fail to recognise the need for sustainability and rape the natural world for short-term profit it is likely that they will be more ‘competitive’ than our sustainable businesses. In these circumstances we may need to explicitly choose not to be internationally competitive. The Australian people would be better served by an open, frank, honest approach in the Sustainability Charter, rather than by concocting a charter that is not honest or frank that tries to promise all things to all men. People will have to change. Society will have to change. Business will have to change. Let us not have a charter that leads people or business to believe that they will not have to change.
6. The Sustainability Charter should be an uplifting document that gives the young in particular hope for the future. This principle written by an economist may have merit but it is hardly inspiring and the intent is unclear. One of the main reasons that our current society is unsustainable is that the true worth of natural resources is grossly undervalued. In many instances the worth of the resource is in fact put at zero and prices are determined solely by the cost of extraction. There should be a principle in the Sustainability Charter that requires that natural resources be allocated their full value. This should include whole of lifecycle costs, eg. In metals mining the cost of full environmental restoration, the cost of recovery of metals at the end product lives and the cost of recycling. Similarly, in the case of agriculture, water needs to be given a proper price based on allocation of what is available after proper environmental flows for rivers and wetlands have been provided.

7. Principle 7 is supported but the Sustainability Charter should recognise that there will be a massive educational effort required. The 'broad community' will not be able to contribute effectively to a debate on sustainability issues if there is not a good understanding of what sustainability is and what changes might be required in society. There needs to be a focus on informing the community at large.

National Competition Council – Applicability to the Sustainability Charter

Comments expressed earlier under the heading of **Sustainable Cities Report – Recommendation 3** apply equally here.

Ecological Footprints

Ecological footprints is a useful concept but there is a need to educate much of the community as to what it means before it will be truly useful as a tool to promote more sustainable lifestyles.

Additionally, government policies need to actively promote smaller ecological footprints. For example there should be tax incentives for people to use small, fuel-efficient vehicles and tax disincentives to use large fuel inefficient vehicles. At present government policies with concessional treatment of 4 wheel drive vehicles are promoting increased ecological footprints. Similarly, there should be generous subsidies to encourage people to adopt solar cells for power generation. At present if one opts to buy 'green electricity' from their power supplier you have to pay a price premium, which again is driving people in the wrong direction.

As a measure ecological footprints is useful but it should be seen as a 'secondary measure'. The end result, 8.1 hectares per capita is quoted, is too remote from peoples every life decisions. We need 'primary measures' to which people can relate. For example all electricity accounts should indicate how many tons of carbon dioxide were created to supply the customer and a 'sustainable level', in line with overall reduction targets, should be nominated with suggestions as to how it might be achieved.

General – Questions for consideration

Dot point - **“Should a sustainability charter consist of aspirational statements, set targets....or both?”**

A sustainability charter should first and foremost be a '**call to action**'; it should state clearly why our current lifestyles are not sustainable. It should spell out where resource consumption has to be reduced, in total not just per capita. It should clearly state that population growth cannot be sustained. It should propose reduction targets for resource consumption and waste generation and measures by which results will be tracked. Finally, it should propose a timetable for achievement of its targets.

Dot point – “**What research will be needed to develop and support the sustainability charter?**”

Ongoing research will be needed to refine the charter, going forward, as our understanding of what changes at the individual level and societal level are required to achieve sustainability. However, there is no time for protracted research before developing a first sustainability charter. An impartial team of scientists and ecologists should be given the task of developing a charter now with existing knowledge. There is no reason why other disciplines should not contribute, eg farmer representatives, but the overriding rule must be that no person can participate who has a vested interest in perpetuating non-sustainable activity.

Dot/point – “**Will there be a cost/gain to the economy by introducing the target(s)?**”

There will almost certainly be short-term costs for the economy, for businesses and for individuals but the alternative, remaining unsustainable will extract a far higher cost. The pursuit of sustainability should be seen as a tremendous opportunity to position Australia as a leader in sustainability technologies, whether they be solar energy, water purification and reuse, recycling of materials, redevelopment of public transport, restructuring of our cities, etc, etc. There will be commercial opportunities in these new technologies and if we are successful, it may be that our economy will be able to transition to a state of sustainability without great disruption or collapse.

The Built Environment

The most striking difference between the Swedish requirements and those of Western Australia is the language used.

The Swedish says, “Cities, towns and other built-up areas **must** provide a good, healthy living environment...”. “Buildings and amenities **must** be located and designed in accordance with sound environmental principle...”. (Text bolded to emphasise the use of ‘**must**’).

In contrast the Western Australian charter states, “**Encourage** the widespread adoption of sustainable building and construction.”

The Western Australian approach only pays lip service to sustainability. It makes sustainability optional. It is almost certain that if developers can build unsustainable buildings cheaper than sustainable buildings they will opt for unsustainable every time. We need a charter with teeth that will **require** that businesses and individuals adopt sustainable practices.

Energy

The difference between the Swedish and West Australian objectives with regard to energy is stark. The Swedish objective of decreasing the environmental impact of energy use in residential and commercial buildings such that it will be lower in 2010 than in 1995 is the sort of action that is required.

In comparison the West Australian objectives are all motherhood statements that can be satisfied while increasing the environmental impact of energy use.

Again it is evident that Sweden is serious about achieving sustainability while Western Australia is only paying lip service to sustainability.

The Australian Sustainability Charter should include an energy use objective worded in similar terms to the Swedish energy objective. It should include industrial use of energy so that it is clear that the statement captures the totality of energy use in our society. It should include a reduction objective, as we do need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 70% by 2050.

A single powerful statement on energy use and reducing environmental impact would drive a whole raft of beneficial actions, such as:

- Stabilisation or reduction of population
- Improvements in public transport
- Reduction in car dependence
- Improved vehicle efficiency
- Accelerated adoption of solar cell technology and other alternative electricity generation technologies
- Adoption of more efficient electrical devices
- Improved housing and commercial design to achieve passive heating and cooling
- Development of local food production to reduce transport requirements
- Etcetera

Transport

The second dot point of the West Australian charter that aims to achieve sustainable transport through improved public transport services is supported.

The first dot point regarding development at transport nodes is not supported. Dr Peter Newman has promoted this idea in Western Australia and in NSW. There is not one shred of evidence that high-density residential development adjacent to transport nodes has reduced reliance on private motor vehicles and has increased public transport use. In Sydney public transport use as a proportion of total journeys has steadily declined. While high-density developments have proliferated near railway stations there has been no increase in the capacity of the Sydney rail network.

As per earlier comments under the heading **National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development** the current plan for the future development of Sydney, the “City of Cities Plan” which embodies Dr Newman’s ideas is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Focusing activity into a small number of large urban centres will only enshrine high levels of vehicle use. High-density housing, which has been promoted by Dr Newman and the development lobby, is inherently unsustainable.

The structure of our cities, particularly of Sydney needs to be rethought and changed. We need to recognise that Sydney in particular has almost certainly already exceeded its sustainable limits in terms of population with its huge ecological footprint, in terms of the area Sydney covers and consequent reliance on fossil fuels and in terms of finite resources such as water. One element of determining how Sydney can be made sustainable will be to determine a sustainable population level for Sydney. This issue cannot be avoided.

Summary

As stated in my opening paragraphs the achievement of sustainability is an urgent task that needs to be achieved within the lifespan of those who are already young adults.

The Committee needs to tackle the challenge that it has been given with courage and vision, as both will be required in large measure for Australia to achieve sustainability within the time we have left.

This is a unique opportunity to show leadership. There are many people in Australian society who are concerned about the future, about the environment and about sustainability. I am certain that the Committee would receive strong support if it issues a bold, visionary and honest statement on what will be required for Australia to achieve sustainability.

Yours Sincerely

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