

**THE STANDING OF SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT IN GOVERNMENT**

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Responsibility for the contents of this Report lies entirely with Jonathon Porritt writing in a personal capacity. It does not purport to represent the collective view of the Sustainable Development Commission, even though it draws heavily on work done by the Commission over many years.

Special thanks are due to Ian Christie, who acted as co-author of earlier drafts of the Report. It would not have been possible to marshal so much material in a more or less coherent way without Ian's indefatigable efforts – and wise words of advice!

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PREFACE

I hope the rather boring title of this Report won't put readers off! Look on what follows less as a treatise on the ins-and-outs of sustainable development in government and more of a mystery story. Not a full-blown murder mystery story (I'm happy to say that sustainable development is alive and kicking across the UK), but a general enquiry into why a government that has shown such promise on several aspects of sustainable development has ended up with a balance sheet that has almost as much on the debit side as on the credit side.

I stepped down as Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission in July 2009, after nine years. In those last few months, the Commission published both a "snapshot" of the state of play (in terms of all the different policy areas covered in the UK's Sustainable Development Strategy), and a portfolio of "Breakthroughs" celebrating the work of some of the most creative individuals and organisations already out there making sustainable development a reality in the UK. The third element in this "review process" would have been this publication, if it had been completed in time. I'm now bringing it out in a personal capacity, given that I have somewhat more room for manoeuvre as ex-Chair than I did when still in post!

This is therefore neither a comprehensive account nor an impeccably dispassionate one. But I sincerely hope it sheds some light on what I see as the mystery of this Government's relative under-performance in making sustainable development a powerful and present reality in people's lives here in the UK.

The Sustainable Development Commission has a unique vantage point in terms of reviewing these issues. It is at the same time both inside and outside the system, having been established by the UK Government in July 2000 as the Government's principal independent advisor on all matters relating to sustainable development. Its remit is to advise and help build capacity across the public sector in the UK, and this remit was extended in 2007 to enable the Commission to take on a scrutiny/watchdog role.

The Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission is appointed by the Prime Minister, and reports directly to the Prime Minister and to the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The new Chair is Will Day, who took over from myself in July 2009.

In April 2004, the SDC published an assessment of the progress made against this Government's first Sustainable Development Strategy, "A Better Quality of Life", which was published in 1999:

"Our assessment is that neither the UK Government, nor the Devolved Administrations, nor our society as a whole, have as yet fully assimilated how far the goals of sustainable development represent a radical critique of present policies and achievements, how far adrift we are from meeting our global and national responsibilities and creating a fully sustainable society,

and how very much more needs to be done in engaging society as a whole in facing up to the challenges of sustainability. The commitment given so far is too generalized and too patchy to deliver the changes needed.

We have the impression that the Government seeks to promote sustainability mainly through numerous small initiatives and shifts of policy, none of which is too demanding by itself, but which may cumulatively lead us to a more sustainable society in the long run. We recognize the political expediency of this model of social engineering. But we think that the situation of the world is too grave for modest incrementalism to be sufficient”.¹

Five years on, it seems timely to see how much progress has been made to address that challenge. When I was appointed as Chair in July 2000, there was a strong feeling that the Prime Minister’s decision to bring together the SDC’s two predecessor bodies (the Round Table on Sustainable Development and the high-level Panel on Sustainable Development), and to appoint a known “radical” as its first Chair, provided a clear “expression of intent” to bring sustainable development closer into the mainstream of government. Personally, I was persuaded that New Labour was indeed serious about an agenda that seemed to fit very closely with its declared priorities, and there were any number of extremely encouraging developments in those early days.

For me, one of the most important of these was the 1997 Statement of Intent on Environmental Taxation. It’s so long ago now that I imagine most people will have forgotten just how impactful this was at the time:

“The Government’s central economic objectives are the promotion of high and sustainable levels of growth and high levels of employment. By that, we mean that growth must be both stable and environmentally sustainable. Quality of growth matters; not just quantity.

Delivering sustainable growth is a task that falls across Government. It will be a core feature of economic policy under this Administration. The Treasury is committed to that goal.”²

Great stuff. Three years on, however, the Fuel Tax Protests provided the first real test of the Government’s aura of untouchability. The shock to the Treasury system was astonishing. Commentators both within and close to the Treasury believed that this was the point where the Treasury (and Gordon Brown personally) lost any serious enthusiasm for reconciling environmental sustainability and conventional economic growth. By 2002, when the Treasury published an update on the Statement of Intent (“Taxation and the Environment: Using Economic Instruments”), it was clear – from the 58 dense pages of Treasury blather – that little remained of the original ambition.

Happily, there was a lot of really positive stuff going on at that time, regardless of the Treasury. This included John Prescott’s “10 Year Integrated Transport Strategy”, Defra’s pioneering work both on sustainable farming and food (which emerged as a ground-breaking Strategy in 2002) and on Sustainable

Production and Consumption (which led eventually to the Round Table on Sustainable Consumption and a marked shift in Government thinking on the centrality of consumer-based initiatives), some early thinking about the importance of sustainable procurement, and a host of encouraging developments inside DTI which eventually materialised in the 2003 Energy White Paper.

In retrospect, that White Paper marked a high point in energy policy. Over the next five years, progress in this critical area of policy was mind-numbingly slow, and only picked up again with the creation of a new department (the Department of Energy and Climate Change) in 2008. The barriers which are analysed in Chapter 2 became more and more problematic.

Elsewhere, 2005 marked another high point, with the publication of “Securing The Future”. Defra played an enormously important role in this process, driving things through the system almost single-handedly, without a great deal of cross-government buy-in. It had to be done that way, but that lack of buy-in at the time undoubtedly contributed to the slow rate of progress in subsequent years.

Fortunately, the SDC has been able to develop all sorts of ways of countering that lack of buy-in, and to identify real champions (both Ministers and senior officials, in Whitehall, Cardiff and Edinburgh) with whom to pioneer novel approaches. Its work with DCSF is highlighted on page 39. It has supported/exhorted many departments by using their own Sustainable Development Action Plans as a way of securing greater buy-in across the whole department. And its built long-term relationships with a number of departments in the front line of sustainability issues.

For instance, the SDC worked with the Department of Health from 2004 onwards to develop a unique capacity-building tool – the Good Corporate Citizenship Self Appraisal Tool – for organisations across the entire NHS. (The take-up of the “GCC” has been hugely encouraging. It’s recently been updated, and is now being “re-versioned” for use with the Social Services sector). This kind of collaboration builds both confidence and trust, and has led onto a whole range of shared projects with the Department, including the first comprehensive “Carbon Footprint” for the NHS (done together with the Stockholm Environment Institute), and further collaboration with the newly-established Sustainable Development Unit for the NHS.

Although I’m not sure that Gordon Brown’s heart is really in sustainable development (that’s a big part of the mystery as far as I’m concerned!), he did two big things when he took over as Prime Minister. First, he forced the Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O’Donnell, and all his Permanent Secretaries, to start getting serious (for the very first time) about delivering on the Government’s own already rather unambitious targets. Second, he created a new department (merging the Climate Change and Energy Departments of Defra and BERR in a new Department of Energy and Climate Change) under Ed Miliband as its new Secretary of State.

Since then, the contrast between Ed Miliband's performance and that of all his predecessors (as Secretaries of States or Ministers in the old BERR/DTI) is extraordinary – and shameful, as far as the sum of this Government's record on energy issues is concerned. So many wasted years. So many missed opportunities to get things properly sorted here in the UK, even as Tony Blair bestrode the international stage with such determination and eloquence that the UK became the undisputed leader on global climate politics. For those involved at first hand in seeking to narrow that preposterous gap (between the home front and the global stage), it became impossible not to give in to periodic bouts of incredulity, rage and even despair.

It's only fair to say that all is not yet well at DECC – the merging of two very different civil service cultures has proved to be something of a nightmare. But Ed Miliband has just got on with it, setting aside redundant civil service advice when he had to (on feed-in tariffs, for instance), stiffening the resolve of some of his more weak-kneed Cabinet colleagues, grappling with a lot of the "wicked issues" that had previously been parked as just too difficult, and basically doing more in his first six months than in the preceding six years.

He did inherit one great benefit: the Climate Change Act, which for me stands out as the single most important addition to the Statute Book that this Government has achieved. That Act preceded Ed Miliband, but the accelerated follow-up to it (in terms of the Low Carbon Implementation Plan and departmental Carbon Budgets) would have been a lot harder to negotiate (and ultimately push through) without real leadership from Ed Miliband and Gordon Brown. I still find myself at odds with this Government on a lot of energy-related issues (not least its continuing nuclear fantasies!), but it's just been a joy to see someone come into a serious government position like that and get properly stuck in.

For me as the Chair of the SDC, however, there was a painful irony in all this. Just imagine we'd had half a dozen Secretaries of State (in different departments) equally intent on mainstreaming the Government's own Sustainable Development Strategy over the last nine years. And that's where we get to the heart of the mystery I alluded to earlier.

You can't do sustainable development properly unless, first and foremost, you do sustainable economic development. The economics drives everything else. Perhaps it shouldn't be that way, but it is. Everything else falls into place, including the full repertoire of "environmental protection measures", if a country's economy is being driven forward in a genuinely sustainable way. And here in the UK, it absolutely isn't.

For reasons that I still find incredibly difficult to pin down, New Labour became as enthusiastic as its Tory predecessors about a peculiarly fundamentalist form of neo-liberal orthodoxy. For a decade (up until the economic crash in 2008), this contaminated so much of the Government's overall performance. Even the best things it has done (the minimum wage, Sure Start, massive improvements in healthcare, huge capital programmes in education and health and so on) have been diminished either by a perverse reluctance to

demonstrate the redistributive benefits of those measures, or by a compulsive obsession with “marketisation” strategies.

And therein lies the principal reason for the underperformance – in my opinion. But the failure to properly understand, over thirteen years, what sustainable development really means hasn’t helped much either.

I hope what follows will be read in the spirit with which it has been written. The cumulative endeavours of hundreds of SD pioneers across the whole of the UK public sector has moved this agenda much further forward than many believed possible. Paradoxically, it’s that success story that still leaves me feeling somewhat frustrated – in the knowledge of how much more could have been done with clearer, uncompromising leadership.

1. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A BIG IDEA

All is not well in terms of the model of progress that has dominated our lives for the last thirty years or more. Even the most enthusiastic advocate of the kind of global economy that has dominated affairs over the past generation now has rather less to say in its defence. Countries the world over are picking up the pieces after the worst recession since the 1930s; accelerating climate change poses an unprecedented threat to the stability and wellbeing of all societies; despite huge increases in GDP during that time, more than a billion people still live in conditions of absolute poverty; progress on the much-heralded Millennium Development Goals has been slow, and in certain cases non-existent; eco-systems (and the services they provide) are more at risk than ever before; and serious resource constraints (including the availability of cheap oil and gas) loom larger than they have ever done before – masked only by the current economic recession. By any standards, this does not represent the kind of combined balance sheet that we might be looking for after nearly 30 years of predominantly benign economic conditions.

This alarming state of affairs comes as no surprise to those who have strenuously questioned for many years the viability of today's model of progress. In 1987, the Brundtland Report, "Our Common Future", drew a bleak picture of what the world would look like if we failed to take radical action to address the two great challenges of the modern age: how to continue to create wealth without undermining the physical environment upon which all wealth creation depends; and how to distribute that wealth more fairly in order to put an end to absolute poverty around the globe.

Despite occasional "countervailing interventions" (such as the 1992 Earth Summit, the Montreal Protocol to ban the production and use of ozone depleting gases, the global debt-relief campaign, the Kyoto Protocol, and so on), complacency was then and still is the dominant characteristic of nations' responses to the Brundtland Report. Although the 1992 Rio Declaration from the Earth Summit could not possibly have spelled out more clearly the consequences of sticking to our "growth-at-all-costs" model of prosperity, the signatures of the 196 Prime Ministers and Heads of State on that Declaration have turned out to count for very little in reality.

Even now, there is a significant number of political and economic conservatives who would have us believe that all we need to do is to get back to that model of conventional economic growth as fast as we possibly can. The near-collapse of the world's banking system has inspired an unprecedented response from politicians the world over to recapitalise that system and to restore stability to capital markets. "Whatever it takes, for as long as it takes" has become the watchword of world leaders intent on putting this nightmare behind them just as soon as is practically possible.

Such sentiments are understandable. They are also predictably popular with electorates. Recessions impose heavy costs on affluent societies, and devastating burdens on the poorest and most vulnerable within those societies and in the developing world. The short-term pressure to restore

economic growth is correspondingly intense. But the idea that we might soon be back to the same kind of hell-for-leather, climate-threatening, resource-intensive and fundamentally inequitable economy seems extraordinary. We risk learning all too little from the recent upheavals in finance and from the warnings they provide about the dominant paradigm of progress, wealth and economic growth.

In the face of all these warnings, it seems astonishing that there has been so little rigorous questioning of the model itself. The new report authored for French President Nicholas Sarkozy by Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen (“The Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress”) represents the sole high-level response to the economic crash that takes on that challenge. The paramount role accorded to growth in the economy as *the* yardstick of progress and success is very deeply entrenched in political thinking worldwide. It is hard for governments and political parties to begin to imagine an alternative, so accustomed are we to seeing ‘growth’ as an end in itself and as the source of solutions to every problem. President Sarkozy has referred to this as “GDP fetishism”.

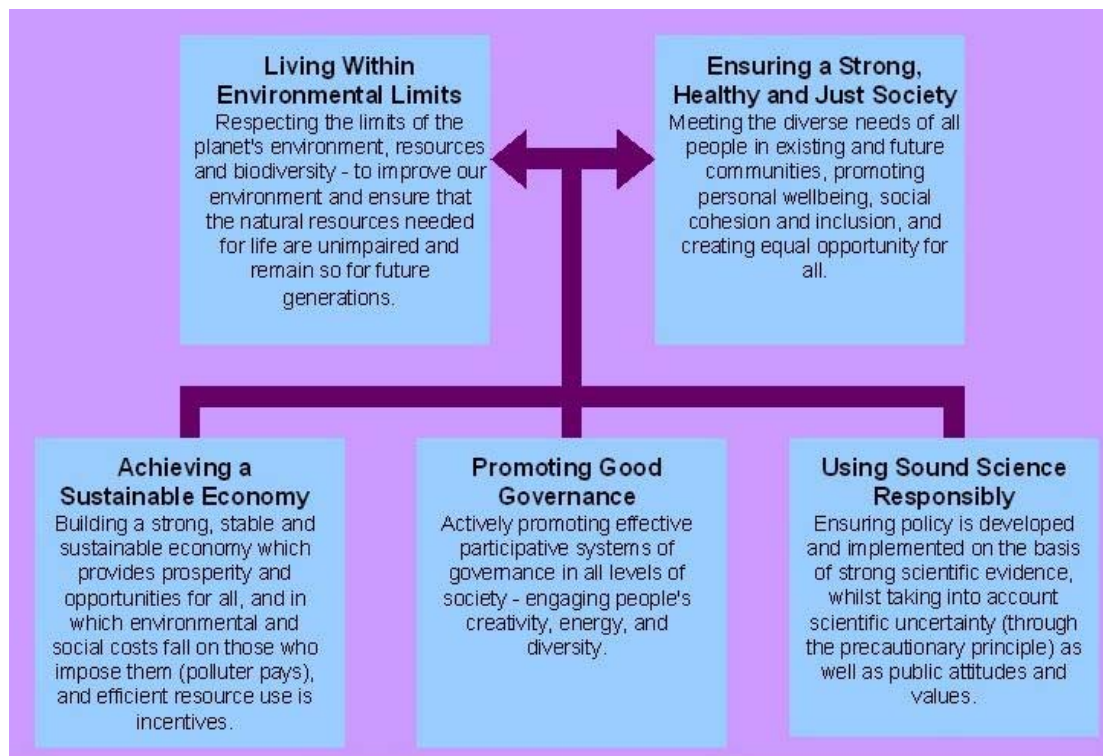
Whilst there has therefore been no shortage of warm words about “learning the lessons of the crash”, there has been no serious intent to rethink the fundamental paradigm of progress that has dominated our lives since the 1970s.

1.1 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

Sustainable Development, elaborated since the Brundtland Report through a vast academic and policy literature, has gradually emerged as the only systematic ‘big idea’ which can match the neo-liberal paradigm of consumption-driven growth-at-all-costs. It offers a compelling critique of conventional economic growth and its defects, from economic, social and ecological perspectives.

And it provides a way of integrating these perspectives in coherent strategies for promoting well-being, limiting gross inequalities, and safeguarding essential eco-system services.

It is a paradigm capable of supporting distinctive political programmes across the party political spectrum. Conspicuously, however, few alternatives from the mainstream Left or Right or Centre have emerged in the wake of the economic crash. Proposals for a ‘Green New Deal’ and for radical re-regulation of the international financial system, (which draw deeply on a sustainable development paradigm), have emerged for the most part from outside that mainstream. Indeed, here in the UK at least, mainstream supporters of the three major parties have as yet not embraced the logic and radical potential of sustainable development with anything more than superficial rhetoric.



At a more operational level, the record of the UK Government on sustainable development as it is understood by most people is not a bad one – far from it, in fact. The 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy, “Our Future, Different Paths”, is widely considered in international circles to be one of the best such strategies. The five Guiding Principles in that Strategy³ (see Box) are recognised as a significant and very practical “framing” of what sustainable development really means in government terms. The establishment of the Sustainable Development Commission (and, in particular, its more recently acquired ‘watchdog/scrutiny’ remit) is seen as an innovative and bold way of helping to promote sustainable development within Whitehall and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Certain aspects of the overall ‘governance architecture’ for sustainable development (to which we will return in the next Chapter) are well-designed and are clearly starting to make an impact.

This means that the UK is considered to be one of the most pioneering countries in the world when it comes to taking sustainable development seriously. The EEAC (European Environmental and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils) has been generous in its praise for what the UK Government, Scotland and Wales have achieved in this regard, and would seek to secure many of the characteristics of the “infrastructure” of Sustainable Development in the UK in their own countries.

For those a little closer to how it feels in reality here in the UK, this is more a reflection of even slower progress in many other countries rather than of outstanding excellence in our own backyard. The reality, as I see it, is that the mainstreaming of sustainable development in the UK, from the margins to the centre of government, is indeed underway, but still moving all too slowly in most respects. Why it has still to make a decisive breakthrough in

governance and politics here in the UK (in contrast to the Netherlands, for example, or the Scandinavian countries) is a complex story, and I have tried here to describe the main reasons for that mystery in the next Chapter.

1.2 UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

There are many definitions of sustainable development. The Brundtland Report's classic formulation speaks of meeting the needs of today while protecting the rights of future generations. The Government's 1999 Strategy similarly spoke of ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come. Sustainable development involves advancing the well-being of society as a whole, remedying injustices or inequity, and protecting the planetary resources and environment that sustains us all.

It is important to be aware of the difference between sustainable development as it is understood by most people (as a rather fuzzy alternative to conventional environmentalism, with the odd nod in the direction of social justice and economic policy), and sustainable development as it is seen by a body like the Sustainable Development Commission. The SDC argued from its inception that sustainable development must become "the central organising principle" of everything Government does. That is indeed the underlying thrust behind "Securing the Future", and the respective strategies in Scotland and Wales (where the concept of a "central organising principle" has been formally adopted).

The next Chapter will examine some of the structural, political and operational reasons why there has been only limited progress in delivering against that broader mission. But over and above all the specific barriers is an unspoken fear that sustainable development, in that deeper sense, is simply not compatible with the dominant economic paradigm of consumption-driven, exponential economic growth stretching indefinitely into the future. Mainstream politics is rooted deep in the paradigm of progress-via-growth, and breaking away from that paradigm requires a plausible and compelling alternative economic model. Regrettably, for all our best endeavours, advocates of a sustainable economy not based on endless economic growth have so far failed to convince politicians (and indeed the majority of UK citizens) that what we have is in fact a broken model, and that in sustainable economic development lies a compelling and realistic alternative.

The Government's intense nervousness surrounding the publication of Professor Tim Jackson's report for the SDC, "Prosperity Without Growth?", in the first few months of 2009, provided a telling insight into the way in which the current paradigm of consumption-driven economic growth has assumed the status of unchallengeable dogma – i.e. a body of deep prejudice beyond the reach of rational discourse. The fact that it is physically impossible to reconcile that particular kind of economic growth, indefinitely into the future, with equitable, biophysically sustainable economic prosperity is an "inconvenient truth" that the Treasury has demonstrated zero interest in exploring.

“Prosperity Without Growth?” went further than this in identifying an even deeper problem. Even if there was sufficient political leadership to expose and explore that fundamental incompatibility, there are no alternative macro-economic tools to investigate what real prosperity would look like if it wasn’t generated by unsustainable consumption-driven economic growth:

“In operational terms, this new macro-economy will require enhanced investment in public infrastructures, in sustainable technologies, and in ecosystem maintenance. It is likely to demand a different balance between public and private goods. It will require us to reframe our concepts of productivity and profitability. Above all, a new macro-economics for sustainability will be ecologically and socially literate, ending the folly of separating economy from society and environment.”⁴

“Prosperity Without Growth?” highlights the absence of a sufficiently convincing alternative macro-economic model, and of an alternative vision of what it would actually mean to be living in a genuinely sustainable world for nine billion people by 2050. This is a key area of concern for the SDC. Although it’s true that one major strand of our work over the last nine years has focussed on sustainable consumption and (more recently) sustainable lifestyles, we are aware that this does not yet amount to “a compelling narrative” about the necessary and desirable transition to a sustainable economy/society as far as most officials in government are concerned which makes it harder to make the case for sustainable development as “the central organising principle” of everything a government does.

With that acknowledgement of just how difficult this can be, it is time to start investigating the mystery that I referred to in the Preface: why is it that sustainable development remains such a problematic concept for governments to embrace?

2. BARRIERS TO THE MAINSTREAMING OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

As noted in the Preface, this is by no means a bad story. A lot of progress has been made over the last few years, and the Sustainable Development Commission has been central in supporting that progress. There has been some important “mainstreaming” (which we will consider in Chapters 3 and 5), and some significant developments in both Scotland and Wales (which we will cover in Chapter 4). And there has been significant progress in putting in place the “architecture” for addressing climate change, consolidated in the Climate Change Act and the new “carbon budgets”.

But the idea that sustainable development now drives government processes in any kind of joined-up, strategic way would still be an illusion. This Chapter seeks to explore some of the reasons for that state of affairs. For the purpose of this “spot check”, I have highlighted a dozen principal “barriers”, some of which are “conceptual”, some “political” and some “operational”.

2.1 CONCEPTUAL BARRIERS

2.1.1 COMPLEXITY

Sustainable development is not easy. It may be a “Big Idea” (indeed, as I’ve argued in Chapter 1, the only big idea capable of providing an alternative paradigm to the model of consumption-driven economic growth), but it’s not an easy idea. For instance, the five Guiding Principles (see Page 10) have to be pursued simultaneously, not in isolation or one after the other. Yet time after time, the SDC has encountered hard-pressed civil servants who would argue that one big tick in one box (with rather more tokenistic nods towards the other boxes) should serve as sufficient evidence of SD in practice.

But addressing all five Principles simultaneously is in itself complex. The two overarching ends (“Living Within Environmental Limits”, and “Achieving a Strong, Healthy and Just Society”) require very different approaches. The test of “living within environmental limits” is a strictly empirical test: define the limit (as in concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, for instance, or threshold limits for pollutants in the air or water), measure levels of compliance against these agreed limits, and then adapt policies accordingly. By contrast, “achieving a strong, healthy and just society” is a predominantly normative aspiration rather than an empirical test, with very different metrics and very different value judgements as to the weight that should be attached to different aspects of “strong, healthy and just”.

At the heart of the concept of sustainable development lies the concept of “dual equities”: inter-generational equity (living today in such a way that we aren’t ruining prospects for people tomorrow), and intra-generational equity (living today in such a way that we reduce – or even eliminate - current unsupportable inequalities in wealth, opportunity and broader entitlements).

In that respect, sustainable economic development means “fair shares for all”, ensuring that people’s basic needs are properly met across the world, while securing constant improvements in the quality of people’s lives through efficient, inclusive economies. “Efficient” in that context simply means generating as much economic value as possible from the lowest possible throughput of raw materials and energy. “Inclusive” means securing high levels of paid, high-quality employment, with internationally recognized labour rights and fair trade principles vigorously defended, whilst properly acknowledging the value to our wellbeing of unpaid family work, caring, parenting, volunteering and other informal livelihoods. Once basic needs are met, the goal is to achieve the highest quality of life for individuals and communities, within the Earth’s carrying capacity, through transparent, properly regulated markets which promote both social equity and personal prosperity.

The open-endedness of these normative aspects, and indeed the scope for claiming different ways of staying within environmental limits, does not make for straightforward policy-making or for technical decision-making based on a simple ‘metric’. SD is often ‘contested’, and offers an arena for the lively clash of values and arguments. It is not reducible to some simplistic policy calculus based on technocratic toolkits.

2.1.2 ACCEPTING LIMITS

As we saw in Chapter 1, the most important element in the dominant model of progress since the middle of the last century has been constant economic growth – without any apparent recognition of there being any physical limits to that growth. Mervyn King, the Governor of the Bank of England, described the last decade as the “NICE era”: Non-Inflationary Constant Expansion. “Constant Expansion” turned out to be not just a flawed economic proposition, but a telling manifestation of the difficulty people have in understanding the degree to which our lives are bounded by physical reality. Constant growth in a finite system is, by definition, an oxymoron – but it’s an oxymoron that permeates the prevailing world view of political and business elites worldwide.

Even for those who have come to recognise that constant expansion in a closed system is a physical impossibility, the hope is that the consequences of that inconvenient reality can be ignored for just a little bit longer. Astonishing assumptions about “limitlessness” still hold sway, with the Laws of Thermodynamics constantly subjugated to the so-called “laws” of the marketplace. For instance, it is regularly argued that the right response to those “limits to growth” already manifest in our lives is to further accelerate growth to generate the wealth required to deal with the consequences of those limits!

This inability to accept the discipline of taking “environmental limits” rigorously into account has been especially apparent in the disturbingly large number of cases over the last nine years of what I have referred to as “SD Abuse” –

where Whitehall departments liberally spray the word “sustainable” around any emerging policy initiative, with little real understanding of what they mean by it – let alone what it really means.

By far the worst example of this was the Deputy Prime Minister’s ill-fated Sustainable Communities Plan in 2002. Ostensibly, this was all about a renewed commitment to an ambitious house-building programme within the broader context of “sustainable regeneration for sustainable communities”. It was a very big deal at the time, with several “Summits” and endless media fanfares between 2002 and 2005.

The Sustainable Development Commission struggled for a year with officials in ODPM to come up with an even half-way acceptable definition of what they meant by “a sustainable community”. It all got very tense. My unofficial comment at the time (“it would be a great Plan, were it not for the fact that it has nothing to do with communities, as such, and promises little more than a decade of totally unsustainable house building”) was judged to be harsh. But now that the Plan has disappeared, largely unmourned by CLG (the successor department to the ODPM), leaving behind a very mixed set of results (even in the Housing Renewal Areas), it doesn’t seem that much over the top. True to its “critical friend” role, the SDC’s official responses diligently sought out as much of an upside as we could find, but still came to the inevitable conclusion that this represented an astonishing wasted opportunity to turn the fine words of the Government’s own Sustainable Development Strategy into the first real success story in a critical policy area.

It wasn’t until 2007 that CLG brought out its admirable “Code for Sustainable Homes”, underpinned by the single most ambitious target this Government has ever adopted (prior to the Climate Change Act and the resulting Low Carbon Transition Plan) – the target for zero carbon housing by 2016. Together with gradual improvements in various Planning Policy Guidelines, this has done more to transform the building industry and get us on track to truly sustainable new housing than the five years of “sustainable communities bluster” that preceded it. And why is that? Because a target like this takes the challenge of “environmental limits” very seriously indeed. The Sustainable Communities Plan didn’t.

2.2 POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

2.2.1 HORIZONTAL VS. VERTICAL

New Labour was concerned from the start with a number of so-called “wicked issues” identified by think-tanks and other analysts in preceding years as particularly problematic from a policy-making point of view. There was a welcome focus on the need for ‘joined-up’ government - that is, policy-making that recognised the complex connections and interdependencies between problems that can so easily be obscured by departmental boundaries.

Failure to be 'joined-up' means various things. First, one department can spend its time dealing with problems generated by failures and unintended consequences of policy in another. Second, policy can become contradictory and incoherent if departments offer different solutions to problems that cut across the concerns of particular groups (elderly people, for example, or children).

The major problem here is a simple one. Power, influence and money flow vertically in Whitehall; sustainable development works horizontally across all those vertical silos, largely dependent on the links between policies and programmes to effect any transformative change in society.

Though I believe it can now be demonstrated that government processes across the UK are now more joined-up than they were before 1997, this is still having only a limited effect with regard to the effective governance of sustainable development. 'Horizontal' policymaking requires an ethos of collaboration that is hard to instil. Narrow departmental (and team) loyalties develop naturally and are often reinforced by team managers. The pressure of work means that thinking beyond one's unit and working with people spread across Whitehall, or across a council, is a difficult skill to acquire and sustain.

Against that backdrop, "maximising synergies" in pursuit of different but complementary departmental objectives remains extremely problematic, and the lack (in most instances) of a single-minded champion to seek out those horizontal synergies, in the teeth of siloed bureaucracy and risk-averse inertia, ensures continued policy failure. For example, it was not until 2007 that the Department of Health came to the conclusion that it was unlikely to achieve many of its physical activity targets (which are crucial to the success of its Obesity Strategy amongst other policy objectives) without the Department for Transport boosting investments in cycling and walking – instead of piling yet more taxpayers' money into new and "improved" roads. A few tens of millions of pounds changed hands from Health to Transport, to the restrained delight of campaigners who'd been advocating this kind of blindingly obvious synergy for many years.

The "matrix model" adopted by the SNP Government in Scotland (see page 42) was designed in part to overcome the perennial problems associated with Whitehall's vertical silos. It's too early to say whether this is going to make the kind of deeper, longer-lasting impact the Scottish Government is looking for, but it clearly creates greater structural opportunities for SD to thrive than is the case in Whitehall.

2.2.3 CLIMATE CHANGE AS A "PROXY" FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Justifiably, this Government prides itself on the steps it has taken to address climate change – from the Climate Change Levy through to the EU ETS and the new Climate Change Act. As I've said, Tony Blair undoubtedly led from

the front on climate change, inspiring a profound “shift of priorities” across Whitehall, and Gordon Brown has worked closely with David Miliband, as Foreign Secretary, to maintain an extremely proactive position for the UK in global climate change diplomacy. Furthermore, in creating a new department (the Department of Energy and Climate Change), under Ed Miliband as its first Secretary of State, he has started to remove some of the structural blockages in Whitehall that meant in the past that our domestic delivery on climate change never matched the quality of our international leadership.

In many respects, climate change has been used by this Government as the “next best proxy” for full-on sustainable development. As a result, the domination of the SD scene by climate policy is a source of concern for many campaigners on the grounds that it risks excluding other urgent environmental and social justice issues. It must be said, however, that there have been good reasons for doing this, at national or local level: effective climate action needs to span the economy as a whole; it offers a ‘way in’ to action on resource efficiency and the development of new environmental technologies; it provides a means of taking the first important steps away from unsustainable development. In some ways, it is therefore a more manageable policy concept than is ‘SD’, and it can open up minds and processes such that SD can begin to gain purchase as a result.

However, climate action has not necessarily been viewed in this systematic way, promoting linkages and synergies across different policy areas. As Secretary of State in Defra, David Miliband unceremoniously dropped sustainable development as “Defra’s mission” (as established by Margaret Beckett, his predecessor), and after a whirlwind and ill-advised flirtation with the notion of “One Planet Living” as Defra’s driving impulse, sought instead to put climate change at the Department’s heart, rather than sustainable development. He then did exactly the same as soon as he moved to the FCO, dispensing with sustainable development as the wider framework within which climate policy would be pursued.

The “either/or” thinking that lies behind this (either we do sustainable development or we do climate change) betrays a surprisingly superficial understanding of sustainable development and its political potential.

One way to think about this is to consider whether a successful set of policy interventions that somehow ‘dealt with’ climate disruption would at the same time constitute a comprehensive solution to today’s unsustainable development. Clearly it would not. We would still be putting whole eco-systems at risk, living with gross inequalities, losing vital resources (such as fish stocks and topsoils), and still facing the challenge of feeding an ever-growing global population while trying to safeguard biodiversity and habitats worldwide. The fact is that accelerating climate change is but one manifestation (albeit a potentially civilisation-threatening manifestation!) of the kind of inherently unsustainable economic development upon which this and every other government depends. This has not as yet been recognised by Ministers. The FCO’s strategy couldn’t be clearer on that score, with its favourite adage: “high growth, low carbon”.

2.2.4 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS “THE ENVIRONMENT”

Sustainable Development as an idea has its roots in the diagnosis of unjust exploitation of material resources and ecological services. It places our continuing dependence on the environment at the heart of economic and social policymaking. It calls for the integration of ecological awareness and protection with the promotion of equitable prosperity and well-being. Self-evidently, this makes SD much more than an environmental idea. The reality, however, is that the vast majority of Ministers and civil servants continue to see sustainable development as an environmental concept – and therefore the primary responsibility of the Department of the Environment rather than of government as a whole. This mis-labelling of sustainable development as “environment” continues to restrict its political salience.

When the Sustainable Development Commission was set up in 2000, its “sponsorship” was located within the Cabinet Office, reflecting the formal recognition that SD covers a much more substantive terrain than environment alone. However, Ministers in the Cabinet Office had little interest in their new Non-Departmental Public Body, and were happy to delegate sponsorship responsibility to Defra, which was already providing the lion’s share of the budget for the SDC. (In those days, the SDC’s budget amounted to around £350K. Since then, it has worked hard with Defra both to grow and to diversify its income sources, and in particular, to ensure “full ownership of the SDC” in the Devolved Administrations).

As a result, although the SD strategy has indeed been reinforced with an extensive ‘infrastructure’, as outlined in the next Chapter, there has been no central coordinating apparatus to enforce its prioritisation across Government - in the same way, for instance, that ‘modernisation of public services’ and ‘social exclusion’ became inescapable agendas for all departments.

Social exclusion strategy was run from Number 10 and the Cabinet Office through the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), with considerable resources expended on central coordination. The SEU produced an impressive range of analyses of some of the intractable problems the Government faced, and took forward a number of innovative policies that have had lasting impact. There remains a Cabinet Committee on Social Exclusion. Tellingly, by contrast, there is no Cabinet Committee for Sustainable Development, and the phrase appears nowhere in the list of Cabinet Committees. Notional responsibility is taken at this level by a Sub-committee, on Energy and Environment, which indicates both a subordinate level of political attention and priority and, yet again, an identification of ‘SD’ with ‘environment’ and ‘climate policy’.

Such a powerful Cabinet mechanism would not guarantee success (and would mean very little without full support from the Prime Minister), but would be able to focus on generating cross-departmental collaboration and

agreement. It could also help avoid some of the damaging contradictions in economic and environmental policy that currently undermine SD strategy.

The lack of this kind of central driver makes it all the more problematic that Defra has been such a willing party to the systematic mis-labelling of SD as “the environment”. Both David Miliband and Hilary Benn have made it clear that their overarching priority as Secretary of State in Defra, has been to deliver much more effectively on “the environment part” of sustainable development – ensuring, in their minds, a better balance between the environmental leg of the “three-legged stool of sustainable development” when set against its social and economic legs. In itself, that makes a lot of sense, but only if it is accompanied by an equal determination “to promote sustainable development across the whole of government”.

In effect, this task is shared between the Sustainable Development Unit in Defra and the Sustainable Development Commission itself. Until 2007, Defra’s principal Public Service Agreement was precisely that cross-government promotion of SD. It was widely acknowledged, however, that this had proved to be relatively ineffective. It was therefore dropped, under the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, and sustainable development was relegated to just one of Defra’s Departmental Strategic Objectives, rather than maintaining sustainable development as the strategic framework within which all its objectives should be pursued. At the same time, the Treasury agreed with the SDC that it would track progress on sustainable development by reviewing a number of the new cross-departmental PSAs, but it is by no means clear to me that this has worked any better than having a formal PSA for Sustainable Development.

It is difficult for me to understand the logic of all this. Defra remains a relatively low-ranking department, not particularly well-equipped to fight its corner in Whitehall. Although there have been some positive outcomes over the last few years arising out of its relationships with departments like Health, Education, Transport, Business, Communities and Local Government, FCO, DFID and, of course, the Treasury, all sorts of initiatives continue to issue from those departments that directly undermine progress towards sustainable development.

The strengthening by Defra of the SDC (with a much stronger focus on its watchdog role) has gone some way to addressing that relative lack of influence with other departments, but it is clear to me that the Sustainable Development Unit in Defra also needs considerable additional resources to get the rest of Whitehall proactively on side with sustainable development instead of having to do a huge amount of fire-fighting to limit the damage.

There is a marked contrast here between Defra’s approach, and that adopted in both Scotland and Wales. In both these governments (as we will see in Chapter 5), sustainable development has been treated as a genuinely cross-cutting concept in its own right, with an increasingly differentiated approach to getting real traction across government.

2.2.4 TREASURY INDIFFERENCE

These “framing issues” have been compounded by limited engagement on the part of the Treasury. From 2000 onwards (when the Treasury’s favoured policy instrument of the Fuel Tax Escalator was discredited by an improbable coalition of farmers, lorry-drivers and climate change deniers), there has been no discernible strategy within Treasury to get to grips with (let alone actively promote) genuinely sustainable economic development. Indeed, from that point on, its impressive “Statement of Intent on Ecological Tax Reform” (1997) was, to all intents and purposes, quietly set aside. As a consequence, not only is the percentage of total tax revenues derived from environmental taxes today less than it was in 1997, but the whole idea of strategic fiscal shift (moving the burden of taxation from the things we want more of to things we want less of including waste, greenhouse gas emissions and so on) has been ignored – as the Environmental Audit Commission has robustly pointed out on many occasions.

Elsewhere, Treasury has also done little to promote the key priority of resource efficiency on any kind of systematic basis. Indeed, it has failed over the last decade even to resolve a dispute with DTI/BERR/BIS as to the best way of defining resource productivity! It has also been reluctant to commit to any hard-and-fast statement of what it means by “sustainable economic growth”, as demonstrated by its most recent and most convoluted description in “Prosperous Places” (November 2008):

“Sustainable economic growth refers to economic growth that can be sustained and is within environmental limits, but also enhances the environment and social welfare, and avoids greater extremes in future economic cycles”.⁵

It’s not that the Treasury hasn’t done good things over the last twelve years to bring about more sustainable ways of creating wealth. The Landfill Tax has proved to be an extremely successful fiscal intervention to help drive down the amount of waste going to landfill. The Stern Report on “The Economics of Climate Change” was commissioned by the Treasury. And the recent establishment of the Centre of Expertise in Sustainable Procurement inside the Office of Government Commerce indicates a welcome if disturbingly belated recognition of the importance of sorting out sustainable procurement. And together with the SDC, the Treasury is looking at ways of updating the Government’s Financial Reporting Manual to include a proper sustainability element.

But there has been no sustained, consistent leadership from Treasury, and that constant indifference (and occasional hostility) has cascaded through the rest of Whitehall and beyond, signalling that while SD is important, it is not fundamental to policy-making. This has been seriously damaging. The importance of the interventions noted above shows what might have been achieved had the Treasury consistently backed the vision and principles set out in the Government’s own SD Strategy. Unfortunately, I fear that a large

number of officials inside the Treasury don't even know that the Government has got a Sustainable Development Strategy.

2.2.5 “NO VOTES IN SD”

Put at its crudest, there is a strong view amongst many politicians that there are “no votes in sustainable development”. Another way of putting it is this: ‘We know what the right thing is to do - we just don't know how to get re-elected once we've done it’. That, at least, is the standard perception amongst politicians: SD is not an electorally salient idea, not least because the language itself is seen as off-putting, and attempts to make it so through radical policy initiatives would be asking for trouble at the polls.

And at one level, there is no shortage of psephological evidence to bear out that assumption in relation to the environment rather than sustainable development as such. “The environment” continues to be rated in opinion polls as less immediately important than the economy, crime, health, education and so on; confusion persists regarding the potentially disastrous impact of accelerating climate change, despite many efforts to “engage” the general public; unsympathetic and even hostile coverage from some mainstream media organisations that remain deeply sceptical about the so-called “green agenda” has proved problematic. All of these electoral feedback loops reinforce politicians' instinctive sense that championing SD does not translate easily, if at all, into votes.

That may explain why only a handful of Ministers in the Labour Government since 1997 have demonstrated any serious intellectual curiosity in or enthusiasm for SD. Even though (as we saw in Chapter 1) sustainable development provides the most intellectually robust way of integrating concerns about social justice, continuing prosperity and biophysical sustainability, the vast majority of Ministers that have passed through the Government since 1997 have remained steadfastly committed to conventional economic models that are demonstrably failing to deliver the outcomes they so passionately claim to pursue.

It may be true that voters today are indeed more short-termist and self-interested than previous generations. “What has the future ever done for me?” may well be a familiar knee-jerk response from voters invited to balance the interests of their own generation with those of generations to come. Alternatively, it could just be that many citizens are longing for honest debate and tough-minded leadership about the challenges of overcoming unsustainable trends in production and consumption patterns. The rapid development of grassroots campaigns such as the Transition Towns suggests that just such a constituency is growing strongly. What's more, there is a large body of advocates for SD in business that is simply getting on with valuable work that could be accelerated and expanded with consistent political leadership.

Unfortunately, Labour politicians have had very little affirmation within their relatively narrow political circles for taking on the task of leadership in promoting sustainable development. The think-tanks that once played such a big part in shaping New Labour's policy portfolio have been bit-part players when it comes to thinking through and promoting sustainable development; Ministers' Special Political Advisors have often steered their Ministers away from the higher-risk policy positions – whatever the intrinsic merits of those policy positions might be.

2.3 OPERATIONAL BARRIERS

2.3.1 REGULATORY BLOCKAGES

Over the last ten years, the Sustainable Development Commission built up a strong case for using regulation as a lever to promote sustainable development in both the public and the private sectors. Society, environment and the economy have to be held in balance by the present generation, acting both as trustees for future generations and beneficiaries of past generations. There may be conflicts of interest between current and future generations which cannot be resolved by market choices or other means. Regulation is certainly one of the most important ways in which to safeguard the interests of citizens yet unborn or too young to stand up for themselves – especially in times of economic recession, when the temptation to favour short-term benefits may be most acute.

In that context, one of the worst things a government can do is to send out mixed signals (and sometimes totally contradictory signals) to its own public sector agencies and to the business community. The Treasury has been responsible for a blizzard of mixed signals by ensuring that the principal regulatory bodies in England and Wales (particularly OFWAT and OFGEM) have been required to pay lip-service only to promoting genuinely sustainable economic development.

This has been felt most painfully in the case of OFGEM. It's only in the last year (basically since Ed Miliband became Secretary of State in the Department of Energy and Climate Change) that the Government has started to address OFGEM's multiple blindspots regarding the regulation of energy markets to achieve more sustainable outcomes – blindspots laid bare by the SDC's penetrating critique of OFGEM, "Lost in Transmission".

The situation with OFWAT is not much better. By maintaining a "divide and rule" approach between all the different regulators for the water industry in England and Wales (The Environment Agency, Natural England, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and OFWAT), the Government has allowed OFWAT to take a narrow, economic line to protect water consumers' short-term interests. Defra seems untroubled by the fact that the overall approach adopted by OFWAT during the 2009 Price Review will make it extremely difficult for water companies to achieve the kind of dramatic reduction in greenhouse gases, for instance, that a more intelligent regulatory regime could so easily promote – with no negative impact on consumers.

The Sustainable Development Commission has just completed a review of the role of three key regulators in the public sector: The Audit Commission, OFSTED (both of which have made real progress) and the Care Quality Commission (which, as yet, has not). As we'll see in Chapter 5, the role of the Audit Commission has become particularly influential. The new Local Performance Framework, the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), is led by the Audit Commission, but run by seven relevant public service regulators. The CAA framework is "inherently about sustainability. Sustainable

Development is as much about long-term social and economic benefit as it is about respecting environmental limits. It is about building a strong, healthy and just society. Sustainability considerations will be embedded within the three main area assessment questions which will look for evidence of genuinely integrated outcomes.”

Elsewhere, the Government has often been reluctant to implement in full its commitment in “Securing the Future” to impose a sustainable development duty on any new regulatory body that is being set up. Even with the new Marine Management Organisation (being set up as part of the long-awaited Marine Bill), the Government has chosen to frame its duty via the deliberately vague wording of “to make a contribution to the achievement of sustainable development” rather than a much firmer duty “to further sustainable development”. This kind of indeterminate vacillation remains all but incomprehensible.

One small but significant exception to this was the decision by DCMS (after a year of active advocacy by the SDC) to set up a separate watchdog body for the Olympic Games, with clear, designated responsibilities for ensuring that the entire process (from design, construction, preparation for the Games, the Games themselves and then through to “legacy issues”) is subject to a formal SD scrutiny process. The “Commission for a Sustainable London 2012” is a unique body, and greatly enhances the prospect that the 2012 Games will indeed be “the most sustainable Olympic Games ever”.

2.3.2 DEPARTMENTAL “PATH-DEPENDENCE”

There is a fundamental reality in all governance systems of what political scientists call *path-dependence*. This means that decisions about institutional arrangements taken in the past tend to have a very long shelf-life, embedding interests and attitudes in organisational cultures that can become dysfunctional and create powerful barriers to reform.

Inconsistent political leadership on sustainable development has allowed certain Whitehall departments to remain aloof from any shared responsibility for securing more sustainable outcomes across government. For instance, both the Department for Business, Industry and Skills and the Department for Transport have remained largely resistant to any serious engagement with sustainable development practice, and have successfully defended leadership styles and cultures of practice that have been hostile at worst, and lukewarm at best, to cross-government endeavours on sustainable development. They have relied on an evidence base and on ways of developing new policy interventions that are no longer fit for purpose given what we now have to do to achieve a very low-carbon, ultra-efficient economy.

This has had serious consequences for the two key policy areas of energy and transport. Twelve years on from its first bold declarations about energy efficiency, renewables and “sustainable, integrated transport strategies” (few will now be able to remember John Prescott’s inspiring ten-year vision for an

integrated transport system for the UK), we have still made relatively little progress on the ground.

The fact that a Labour Government has now had to renounce formally its fuel poverty targets (this being the one element of a sustainable energy strategy where the convergence between social justice and environmental responsibility is at its most powerful) is seen by many as one of the most extraordinary failures of a Government which enjoyed a decade of unprecedented economic prosperity without ever getting to grips with the energy needs of some of the poorest communities and individuals in the UK.

Our historical performance on renewable energy is no better, with the UK still third from the bottom in the EU “Renewables League Table”, despite having the best combined potential renewable resource of all European countries. Meanwhile, the nuclear industry is resurgent, and even the coal lobby is now back in the frame, enthusiastically wooing politicians and electorates alike with oxymoronic promises of “clean coal”.

A generation of senior civil servants, going right back to the 1980s, has presided over this policy failure, assiduously defending the interests of particular industries and companies, and in the process successfully undermining the best intentions of a whole succession of new initiatives brought forward by Ministers to set the UK on a more secure and sustainable energy path. The 2003 Energy White Paper (steered through by the then Secretary of State at DTI, Patricia Hewitt) marked the “high point” in terms of sustainable thinking on energy policy, with a strong emphasis on energy efficiency and renewable energy. But it took only a couple of years for the “system” in DTI to marginalise most of its proposals, all the time keeping the flag flying for the old ways of doing things, including coal and nuclear. Echoes of “Yes Minister” are ever-present in the corridors of these particular departments.

To be fair, the problems associated with this kind of “path dependence” are now being addressed. The Climate Change Act, the Low Carbon Transition Plan, the new Departmental Carbon Budgets, and the new Low Carbon Industrial Strategy adopted by Peter Mandelson’s Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have transformed priorities within these departments. Even the Department for Transport can no longer ignore this mandate, and there’s a real sense of the “old guard” amongst senior civil servants increasingly under the cosh to get on with what they should have been doing for the last decade.

2.3.3 “CONSTANT CHURN”

The more complex and cross-cutting a strategy, the greater its vulnerability in the daily grind of government dealing with immediate issues and “fire-fights”. But this ‘inevitable messiness’ has another aspect relevant to SD: the increasing proliferation of initiatives and processes in response to changing policies, new priorities, new chief executives, and incoming Ministers’

demands for initiatives they can call their own. The rapid turnover of Ministers in many areas – the Department of Transport is a particular case in point - means that initiatives come and go swiftly, with imperfect implementation before the next set of priorities and schemes arrive with a new Minister and another new team.

This ever-present “churning” has been made more problematic in the past decade by the impact of public sector modernization (see next section). This has led to endless reorganisations of public bodies, considerable turnover of staff, loss of departmental knowledge, disorientation, pressure to meet the demands of a vast array of performance targets, and considerable investment of time by top civil servants and chief executives in the process of ‘re-engineering’ their organisations. The effect of all this has never been quantified, but the transaction and opportunity costs of regular upheaval must be huge. The impact should not be under-estimated, as it affects staff at all levels of organisations and diverts energy and time from ‘doing the job’ to what could be called “proxy work”. There is substantial evidence that this has had a major impact on the NHS in particular.

2.3.4 PUBLIC SECTOR MODERNISATION

In all sorts of hidden ways, the culture of Whitehall since 1997 has therefore worked indirectly against SD. This can be seen most clearly if one looks at the efforts made to modernise the public sector throughout that time.

Despite the unstinting prioritisation given by both Prime Ministers to public sector reform, it is widely accepted that the actual improvements in our public services have not as yet been commensurate with the unprecedented levels of new investment. In his blistering critique (“Systems Thinking in the Public Sector”) of the endless sequence of modernisation and marketisation initiatives introduced since 1997, John Seddon attributes much of this failure to the imposition of inappropriate free-market disciplines on the public sector, eroding away much of the residual ethos of public service in the process. This is a theme that has been powerfully elaborated on a global basis by Michael Sandel in his 2009 Reith Lectures.

An excessive dependence on narrow targets and an inability to work for “system-wide efficiency” have become the dominant characteristics of layer upon layer of command-and-control bureaucracy. Performance has been incentivised and evaluated against a set of targets and criteria that would appear to take it as read that human nature is predisposed to narrow self-interest and feckless irresponsibility. An obsession with “choice” has obscured the pursuit of all-round quality and fairness. Initiative is often stifled, with risk-taking and cross-departmental working extolled in theory but disincentivised in practice.

Performance management systems may create unintended incentives that get in the way of effective implementation - for example, by failing to give incentives for work across departmental and organisational boundaries that is

essential for a policy to bear fruit. The concept of “Public Value” has been seen by many managers and their private sector partners (to whom so many functions have been outsourced) as little more than “fuzzy nostalgia”. So-called “unintended consequences” abound.

The Government itself (as of June 2009) seems to be abandoning the “target culture” and excessive central control. But against that historical backdrop, many of the barriers to sustainable development referred to in this Chapter (its cross-cutting nature; its emphasis on a very different balance between the short-term and the long-term; its relative complexity at the conceptual level; departmental path-dependence, and so on) militate against its “mainstreaming” across government. Sustainable development has predictably been one of the “losers” in Labour’s strenuous but often misguided efforts to modernise the public sector by the imposition of quasi-market principles.

In 2005, the Sustainable Development Commission published its Report on “Sharing the Value” , focusing on what we described as a “sustainable approach to the modernisation agenda”. Our intention was to persuade Ministers at the heart of the modernisation debate that these reforms should be explicitly located within a sustainable development framework. By “shared value”, we had in mind the following benefits:

Increased value for money (in both the short term and over the long term), with a far stronger focus on ‘invest to save’ strategies;

Mutually reinforcing outcomes (in terms of economic benefits, environmental protection and social justice), rather than crude trade-offs;

A deepening of the idea of increased choice for consumers, through an emphasis on personal responsibility and active citizenship;

A fresh approach to local governance issues, avoiding the extremes of the ‘local vs. central’ debate;

Increased innovation and creativity in policy design and service delivery;

Connecting the modernisation agenda to the Government’s leadership on global action for sustainable development and climate change.⁶

Four years on, this seems even more relevant than it did then. Encouragingly, the Government’s latest strategy document on public services (“Building Britain’s Future”, announced in June 2009) reveals a very different approach to the concept of “public value”, with a much greater emphasis on the over-arching importance of securing “entitlements for all” in a more equitable society, rather than on choice per se.

2.3.5 AN INADEQUATE TOOLKIT

The Sustainable Development Commission has always argued that to establish sustainable development as the “central operating principle of everything Government does”, it has to operate at three different levels: in terms of helping people understand “the big picture”, as outlined in Chapter 1; in terms of providing a comprehensive framework within which to integrate potentially conflicting policy priorities; and as an operational toolkit – in terms of policy-making, performance appraisal, strategy, management systems, procurement and so on. This operational level is very much the gritty, unglamorous end of sustainable development in government, but, ultimately, it’s only here that one can get any realistic sense of how well sustainable development is working in practice.

As we’ll see in the next Chapter, this Government has indeed pioneered a number of tools to help embed sustainable development thinking and practice at the heart of government – the Sustainable Development in Government (SDiG) process itself, the SOGE (“Sustainable Operations on the Government Estate”) targets, Sustainable Development Action Plans, and so on. Although it’s now clearly in need of a thorough going “refresh”, this “architecture of SD governance” has been well-designed and has already made a substantial contribution to securing more sustainable outcomes from Whitehall. And as we’ll see in Chapter 5, both Wales and (to a lesser extent) Scotland have made good progress in developing specific methodologies to help embed SD across both governments.

In Whitehall, there is still a lot missing from the SD toolkit. The Government’s various “regulatory impact appraisal” (RIA) processes have failed to incorporate a proper understanding of sustainable development in policy-making, and have been applied with a very narrow focus on short-term economic benefits. Defra itself came to the conclusion in 2005 that the RIA was having no discernible impact in terms of promoting more sustainable policy-making processes, and spent some time developing a new “integrated policy appraisal tool” (IPA). Limited trials of the IPA proved inconclusive, and Defra reluctantly dropped it, not least because it received little backing for it elsewhere in Whitehall. A new Impact Appraisal tool is now being used, but it is as yet impossible to say whether this will be any more effective than its predecessors.

The same rather muddled picture emerges regarding the various “efficiency reviews” that have gone on over the last decade. These have invariably been done with the emphasis on short-term cuts rather than longer-term value for money. For instance, the Gershon Review of efficiency savings in local government and public bodies did not encourage a systems view of efficiency, but rather a search for immediate cost cutting rather than for sustainable value for money. Great care will be needed to avoid this mistake in the coming rounds of public expenditure reductions.

A specific example of this relates to whole-life costing. Without proper whole-life costing, the balance between up-front capital expenditure and downstream

operational expenditure will always be distorted. Constraining up-front CAPEX (by failing to apply best-practice sustainability and energy efficiency standards) is a classic “false economy”, ensuring that additional operational expenditure running into billions of pounds will be incurred year after year because of energy bills and maintenance that are a great deal higher than they should have been. And because the rules for the Government’s PFI schemes were so badly written at the start, the majority of these schemes have proved to be largely incapable, in this regard, of delivering real “value for money” as far as the taxpayer is concerned.

The situation is at last improving, not least as a consequence of a series of damning reports from the National Audit Office and the Environmental Audit Committee, highlighting the damaging consequences of Treasury’s failure to impose its own “mandatory” requirements in this area, specifying that every public sector body should apply rigorous whole-life costing techniques to all major capital programmes. (This has been happening in only a minority of major projects.)

Elsewhere, progress in implementing sustainable procurement (as set out in the Simms Report on Sustainable Procurement and the Government’s own Sustainable Procurement Action Plan), remains patchy. The Sustainable Food Procurement Strategy for the public sector, for instance, was first launched back in 2003, and has been re-launched at least twice since then, with no noticeable increase in impact. Defra is now carrying out another review, but this will make no more difference this time round unless there is real leadership to implement it on the ground.

CONCLUSION

As we’ve seen, Sustainable Development is inherently complex, is still “contested”, and is a relatively ‘young’ policy concept. Its complexity combines with the challenges intrinsic to all ‘horizontal’ policy-making and implementation to create significant problems in ‘joining up’ and delivery against targets in practice. These difficulties are compounded by ‘path-dependence’ in government, and especially by the enduring cultures of departmentalism and ‘silo’ decision-making in Whitehall.

There is therefore no denying just how many barriers exist to making sustainable development the “central organising principle” of everything government does. As we will now explore in more detail, the overall performance of the Labour Government on SD has actually been rather more impressive than might be imagined given those barriers – many of which are very deep-seated and difficult to address head-on.

Lifting those barriers can only be done if two conditions obtain: first, that there is sufficient political will – marshalled strategically across government as a whole – to dismantle those barriers. Second, that sufficient trust exists between citizens and both Parliament and the Executive to promote an intelligent, cultured debate about what is and isn’t possible in terms of the

biggest challenge of all: securing increased prosperity of a more equitable kind within environmental limits. Without such trust, scepticism as to motive and outright cynicism as to competence will inevitably win out.

Neither condition currently obtains. Which means, quite simply, that measures taken to promote genuinely sustainable improvements in society (however modest and commonsensical they may be) are fighting all the time against the kind of consumerist, materialistic values that governments feel they have to stick to in order to keep the wheels of the economy turning as actively as possible.

3. ESTABLISHING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN WHITEHALL

In this Chapter, I have outlined the steps that have been taken so far in the attempt to embed SD in decision-making processes and in government operations across Whitehall and the public sector in England. Good progress has been made in establishing “the architecture”, and there are now many individual champions across the whole of the public sector intent on using SD to improve the performance of their organizations – despite all those barriers!

3.1 ONE FUTURE, DIFFERENT PATHS

The track record of the governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are covered in more detail in Chapter 5 below. The purpose of *One Future, Different Paths* was to provide a ‘Shared Framework’ for the governments of the UK, ensuring coherence and common purpose, together with a set of UK-wide performance indicators. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have their own sustainable development strategies, which provide the central point of reference alongside “Securing the Future”.

The shared Framework sets out a clear and comprehensive definition for policy-makers of what sustainable development is and what it aims to achieve. The five Guiding Principles (see Box 1 on page 8) are explicit about the need to respect ecological limits to economic development so that the pursuit of prosperity and social justice takes place within those limits, and in relation to sound science and good governance. The definition thus incorporates the ecological core of the idea of sustainable development, and relates this to the achievement of economic and social goals within a rational and democratic framework.

3.2 “SECURING THE FUTURE”

The five Guiding Principles are reflected in “Securing the Future” in terms of four priority areas:

sustainable consumption and production: achieving more with less energy input and taking account of the full life-cycle effects of materials, products and services;

climate change and energy;

protecting natural resources and enhancing the environment;

sustainable communities: this refers to the development of communities that ‘embody the principles of sustainable development at the local level’.⁷

The priorities are also reflected in the Strategy's analysis of how SD can be translated into policy and action in international affairs, relating them to major international negotiations, targets and commitments such as the Millennium Development Goals.

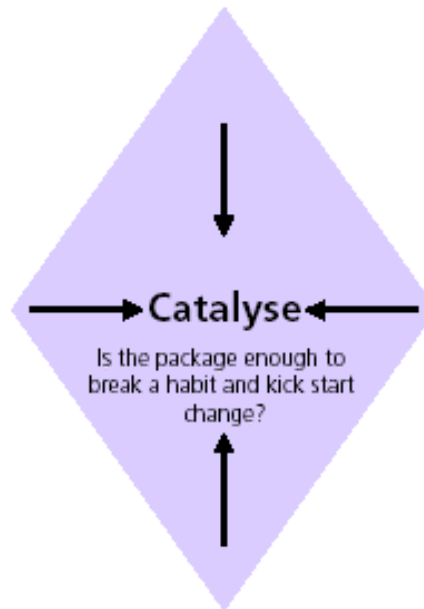
Building on work that first started back in 1994 (when the UK published its first Sustainable Development Strategy, "This Common Inheritance", following up on the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro), the 2005 Strategy established a set of Headline Indicators which Defra reports on annually. These reports provide an extraordinary database, built up over the years, showing good, steady progress on key environmental, social and economic parameters.

The SD Framework also provides an ambitious and sophisticated discussion of how governments can apply the principles in 'helping people make better choices'. This section explicitly tackles the complex and contested area of 'behaviour change', and introduces a pioneering 'behaviour change model for policy-making', which the strategy says 'will be applied in all priority areas'. This model is based on a 'diamond' diagram of approaches to influencing behaviour in order to promote sustainable consumption (see Box overleaf).

Approach evolves as attitudes and behaviours change over time

- Remove barriers
- Give information
- Provide facilities
- Provide viable alternatives
- Educate/train/provide skills
- Provide capacity

Enable



Encourage

Engage

- Tax system
- Expenditure – grants
- Reward schemes
- Recognition/ social pressure – league tables
- Penalties, fines & enforcement action

- Community action
- Co-production
- Deliberative fora
- Personal contacts/ enthusiasts
- Media campaigns/ opinion formers
- Use Networks

Exemplify

- Leading by example
- Achieving consistency in policies

The 'diamond' schema in "Securing the Future"⁸ is used consistently and coherently throughout the document to elaborate on the policy approaches required by the four priority themes for sustainable development. Potentially, it is a powerful tool for embedding 'reminders' of SD strategy across all government documents and appraisal processes. It also makes it plain that the 'Exemplify' action is crucial to the success of the Government's plans for sustainable consumption and production. Unless Government and the wider public sector can (literally) put their own house in order, there is little prospect of being listened to by citizens or by business.

3.3 EMBEDDING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

At the core of this model for promoting and monitoring the translation of the Strategy into practical action lie the following components:

The Sustainable Development in Government Report (see 3.4)

Sustainable Operations on the Government Estate (see 3.5)

Sustainable Development Action Plans (see 3.6)

The Sustainable Procurement Action Plan (see 3.7)

Sustainable Development Ministers (see 3.8)

Local and Regional Frameworks (see 3.9)

The SDC itself (see 3.10)

3.4 THE “SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN GOVERNMENT” REPORTS

The SDiG process has proved to be somewhat problematic for the Government. The first report (relating to the new 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy) was published under Defra’s aegis in 2006; responsibility for the process then transferred from Defra to the Sustainable Development Commission as the central element in the “watchdog function” that the Commission was then given as far as Whitehall was concerned.

Prior to the publication of the 07/08 Report (in April 2009), the overwhelming conclusion in each Report was of a government struggling to “walk the talk” in any serious way, with no consistent leadership from either Ministers or Permanent Secretaries. Both the 05/06 Report and the 06/07 Report highlighted systematic shortcomings of the sort that would not have been tolerated in the private sector. However, any embarrassment proved to be short-lived, with no follow-up mandate to get on top of the challenges of gathering the relevant data, let alone managing it properly.

There was limited awareness at the time of the damaging impact that this was having on the business community. Business leaders were constantly being exhorted by Ministers to raise their game on waste management and climate change. Many of these leaders became deeply sceptical both about the Government’s intentions and about its capacity to deliver on a growing cluster of targets. This was particularly true for those companies seeking to supply goods and services with higher sustainability criteria to Whitehall departments and their Agencies, who then turned out to be largely indifferent to these benefits. Not so much “smart clients” for the private sector to engage with as indifferent and often incompetent clients.

Eventually, the embarrassment became too great to bear, and in 2008, Gordon Brown (as the relatively new Prime Minister) instructed Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O’Donnell to take matters in hand. Permanent Secretaries were in turn instructed to raise their game, and for the first time (despite this having been promised two years earlier), performance on SDiG and on the

targets in SOGE was included in their own performance management contract. At the same time, the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) was charged with establishing a new Centre of Expertise for Sustainable Procurement.

At long last, the real sustainable development champions across central government departments in Whitehall, who had been working away more or less unrecognised for many years on a whole range of operational and procurement issues, suddenly found their efforts properly acknowledged.

3.5 SUSTAINABLE OPERATIONS ON THE GOVERNMENT ESTATE (SOGE)

The SOGE framework is made up of a number of different targets for reporting on by Departments and their Agencies. The assessment is carried out by the SDC, based on data gathered by an independent third party.

As a regular “health check”, the SOGE framework provides reasonably comprehensive data (from an environmental point of view), and has served a useful purpose in terms of establishing some benchmarks for basic environmental management purposes. There are fourteen targets for Departments to report against, eight ‘mandated mechanisms’ to help them improve their performance against these targets (environmental management systems, approved energy efficiency standards for buildings and so on) and a number of commitments from the Sustainable Procurement Action Plan.

All very impressive. But the targets have never been very ambitious, which made the annual “falling short” all the more reprehensible. Things are now improving and the targets themselves are in the process of being significantly upgraded.

3.6 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLANS (SDAPs)

All Whitehall Departments are tasked with producing SDAPs on a regular basis, and these are reviewed by the SDC. The experience so far indicates an encouraging increase in commitment and interest from Departments and (in some cases at least) from their Agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies. The publication of results by the SDC seems to have begun to create a sense of competition and potential exposure in Departments.

An unexpectedly strong performer over the years has been the Department for Work and Pensions, on the face of it some way removed from the core of ‘SD’ priorities. Consistent development of this kind puts other Departments - such as DEFRA itself, officially the overarching ‘owner’ of SD in Whitehall - on their mettle. Incentives for top officials to take core SD priorities seriously - such as the inclusion of SOGE targets in the performance assessment of Permanent Secretaries - should help raise the profile of SDAPs.

3.7 THE SUSTAINABLE PROCUREMENT ACTION PLAN (SPAP)

The SPAP was produced in response to the report by Sir Neville Simms (Sustainable Procurement Task Force, June 2006) on promoting sustainable procurement across Government. The Plan aims to embed SD principles and priorities throughout the procurement systems of Government and all public bodies. Permanent Secretaries are accountable for progress by their Departments in furthering this agenda. The Centre for Expertise Sustainable Procurement (CESP) has been set up in the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) to oversee the SPAP, and to provide guidance for Departments and agencies in taking meaningful action on sustainable procurement. It is astonishing that it should have taken so long to get to this point, and there is still a worrying lack of overall accountability as to who “owns” different aspects of the SPAP, but at least some firm foundations are now in place.

3.8 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MINISTERS

In 1998, the Government introduced a system of “Green Ministers” which operated at a relatively low level through to the publication of the 2005 Strategy. Green Ministers were then re-titled “Sustainable Development Ministers”, convened as a formal Cabinet Sub-committee by a Minister of State in Defra. Serious efforts were made to increase the level of seniority across other Departments. This was only partly successful, and meetings were both infrequent and somewhat formulaic, with relatively little buy-in from other Departments.

Partly as a result of this limited traction, the Sub-committee was dropped after Gordon Brown became Prime Minister and re-designed his Cabinet Committees. It was decided that the Cabinet Sub-committee on Energy and the Environment would be the place where Sustainable Development would be formally represented (in terms of Cabinet structures), although the SDC was deeply concerned at the time that any reference to sustainable development as such was extremely tokenistic.

Defra has apparently been unconcerned about the demise of its “SD Ministers” initiative, although it’s difficult to read this as anything other than a retrograde step in terms of securing cross-departmental co-ordination and support.

3.9 LOCAL AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Sustainable Development in the local and regional governance system is covered in more detail in Chapter 6 below. The overall framework for the English regions is set out in *Securing the Regions’ Future* (DEFRA, 2006). This is now in flux, along with the whole system of regional governance in the wake of the highly damaging Sub-National Review (SNR).

The situation in local government is more stable. There is now what amounts to a 'proxy duty' for sustainable development, in theory at least providing a powerful set of incentives and clear goals for Councils and their partners. As we will see, this comprises a set of strategic frameworks, bundles of performance indicators, a new audit system for local authority areas, and important mechanisms for embedding climate action in local priorities.

SDC'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES (DCSF)

In order to build capacity for sustainable development within DCSF, and through that to affect the delivery of policy across the school sector and beyond, DCSF entered into a unique working arrangement with the SDC. Since 2005, an SDC Adviser has been 'embedded' in DCSF to help policy teams understand the impact of their policies on sustainability and, crucially, how sustainability can make their own policies more effective.

This has developed into joint leadership on sustainability across the school sector and wider DCSF policy on children and young people. Three SDC Advisers now work within the Department supporting its major policy directorates. This is not simply a one-way relationship of advice given and received: the different skills, knowledge and standing of the two organisations have been made full use of to engage different stakeholders in schools, local authorities, universities and the Third Sector. The SDC has benefited greatly from the insights received from DCSF – the "critical friend" role acting in reverse.

A National Framework for Sustainable Schools was published in May 2006, after extensive consultation with schools, young people, business and Third Sector organisations. The Framework was designed by the SDC with significant external input, but the consultation was driven by the Department, giving a formal mandate to a document with clear 'grass-roots' ownership. It resulted in a raft of suggestions ranging from help for teachers and Heads, to doubts about the Department's commitment to a sustainable world expressed by young people.

The Framework has developed into a significant force in the schools sector, despite not being separately funded, nor being a legal imperative, nor having its own pot of money to promote it. The force behind it comes from partners and stakeholders who see the leadership from DCSF and SDC as giving them licence and a shared agenda to work with schools. The key to success has been giving ownership to a range of partners to lead from their strengths.

All this has raised questions about the impact of the environment on children's wellbeing, and the role of schools in tackling climate change. The SDC undertook research in both cases, using its independence to challenge the Department to take action. In turn, the Department has used the evidence to influence policy, to lead the sector, and to bring issues to the attention of other departments. Examples are the publication of 'Every Child's *Future Matters*' which influenced the strong messages in the Play Strategy on child-friendly communities and natural play spaces; and ongoing work to develop a carbon management strategy for schools.

By sharing leadership on sustainable development between the Department and the SDC, a strong web of partners has been built up to influence progress at all levels. Their strong message is that sustainable development cannot just be added to a list of tasks for schools and children's services to tick off. As the Children's Plan states, it is a non-negotiable aspect of all children's wellbeing.

3.10 THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

The Sustainable Development Commission was established in July 2000, but its remit was significantly strengthened as a result of the publication in 2005 of both “One Future, Different Paths” (which relates to the role of the SDC in all the governments of the UK), and “Securing the Future”. Prior to 2005, the SDC had three main functions:

- Advice across the whole gamut of “SD issues”
- Advocacy of SD across government
- Capacity-building within government departments

To this, in 2005, was added the “watchdog/scrutiny” function, embodied primarily in both the SDiG process and in the SDC’s oversight of departmental SDAPs (see above). The readiness on the part of Defra to strengthen the role of the SDC (despite the occasional embarrassment of having to deal with its strictures) has been impressive. This continued through into 2009, when the SDC became an “Executive Non-Departmental Public Body” (rather than an Advisory NDPB), thus assuring greater independence and improved governance arrangements for the Commission.

Although it is the advisory and watchdog functions of the Commission that attract the most attention, its role in helping to build capacity within Whitehall Departments and within the respective government structures in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, is at least as significant. This is best exemplified by the case study provided by DCSF (see Box on previous page).

CONCLUSION

The UK has established an infrastructure for policymaking and implementation for sustainable development that is undeniably impressive. This has emerged over two decades, but there has been substantial progress and acceleration since 2005 in creating the machinery to make a reality of the goals of the 2005 SD Strategies. One might argue that the elements of this SD infrastructure are now *unignorable* across Government. And on paper, at least, they provide a powerful set of commitments, tools, targets and principles that are world-leading.

4. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS

4.1 “ONE FUTURE, DIFFERENT PATHS”

The 2005 Strategy for Sustainable Development “One Future, Different Paths”, spelled out the common goals for SD in the UK as a whole, and indicated that each of the Devolved Administrations (DAs) would produce its own distinctive SD strategy within this broad framework. There would be UK-wide indicators of performance, and also indicator sets specific to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The hope inherent in the Framework (and in its title) is that SD would be seen as a ‘shared endeavour’, and that different paths would lead to ‘one future’. Since then, the politics of devolution have made that more problematic than might once have been hoped for. However, the nature of the devolution process has opened up the possibility for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to break away from problems of ‘path-dependence’ noted in previous Chapters, to the potential benefit of the SD agenda in the DAs and perhaps in England too. Below, we consider key aspects of progress with SD in the new systems in Scotland and Wales, where the changes have been most marked, as well as in Northern Ireland, where progress has been much slower.

4.2 SCOTLAND AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Scottish Executive produced Scotland’s first Sustainable Development strategy document in 2005, under the title “Choosing Our Future”. The SDC for Scotland carried out a detailed Assessment of Progress against this strategy, which was published in 2007. By that stage, there was a new government in office under the Scottish National Party (SNP).

The post-2007 structure of government is markedly different from Whitehall in many respects. As the SDC for Scotland’s 2nd Assessment (2008) makes clear, the Scottish Government is making a radical attempt to break with departmentalism by seeking to develop policymaking by theme, demanding cooperation between Ministers and between delivery units and their stakeholders. The Government has set itself a ‘Single Purpose’:

“To focus government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth”.

This clearly represents a serious effort at adopting ‘SD’ as a fundamental and overriding principle for policy and action. One can argue about what is meant by “Sustainable Economic Growth” in the Single Purpose, but in practice, the structures set up to pursue it would appear to be compatible with the definition of SD given in “One Future, Different Paths”. The SDC for Scotland has closely interrogated what is meant here by “sustainable economic growth”,

pointing out that the concept of “flourishing” will depend entirely on what kind of economic growth the Scottish Government pursues – as argued at greater length in “Prosperity Without Growth?”. It has also commended the consistency of language, approach and high priority accorded to SD in Scotland to date.

The Single Purpose (as laid out in the Government’s Economic Strategy) is to be pursued via five ‘strategic objectives’ (see below) in a National Performance Framework. These are to make Scotland ‘greener, wealthier and fairer, smarter, healthier and safer and stronger’. There are Cabinet Secretaries for these objectives, rather than being located in traditional departments.

Wealthier and Fairer	Smarter	Healthier	Safer and Stronger	Greener
Enable businesses and people to increase their wealth and more people to share fairly in that wealth	Expand opportunities for Scots to succeed from nurture through to lifelong learning ensuring higher and more widely shared achievements	Help people to sustain and improve their health, especially in disadvantaged communities, ensuring better, local and faster access to health care	Help local communities to flourish, becoming stronger, safer, places to live, offering improved opportunities and a better quality of life	Improve Scotland’s natural and built environment and the sustainable use and enjoyment of it

Within this Framework, Scotland has begun to develop its own system for promoting and implementing SD in general and action for environmental sustainability in particular. There is a Greener Scotland Board, including representatives of Government, local authorities, business and the voluntary sector. There is a Sustainable Scotland Network of local authority officers and advocates, and a Scottish Sustainable Development Forum. Local authorities have signed up to a ‘Single Outcome Agreement’, based on the outcomes required by the National Performance Framework. The Government has passed new Acts on Climate Change, Flood Management and Marine Conservation (now enacted), and has set out a strategic goal for ‘Zero Waste’. A Climate Change Delivery Plan aims to achieve a 42% cut in CO₂ emissions by 2020, to pioneer renewable electricity and heat as well as Carbon Capture and Storage, and to bring about low-carbon measures for transport. (These are the most ambitious targets anywhere in the world). The 2010 Budget will involve a ‘carbon assessment’ of all areas of policy.

Whilst it is true that the publications and website of the Scottish Government still encourage the view that SD is largely being framed as ‘environmental

sustainability', there seem to be consistent efforts to live up to the idea of SD as a more integrated way of bringing together environmental, economic and social goals within a bigger framework. The SDC for Scotland is cautiously optimistic about progress, whilst noting that it is still early days for the new framework in Scotland. The problems highlighted by the SDC for Scotland in its 2nd Assessment include:

patchy progress across policy themes, with particular attention now needed for transport policy and infrastructure, public health (e.g. obesity) and fuel poverty;

more clarity needed about the nature of the 'sustainable economic growth' aimed for in the Government's 'Single Purpose';

more action needed to harness the potential for sustainable procurement by the Scottish public sector;

more clarity about how the Government intends to meet its goal of an 80% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and about near-term targets.⁹

4.3 WALES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The National Assembly for Wales (which evolved into the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) was set up with a formal Duty to develop a 'Scheme' to show how SD would be embedded in all the government's decision-making and operations.

Following the establishment of the WAG in 2004, a new strategy for Wales was produced, *Wales: A Better Country*. In the wake of this, a new Scheme for SD was published: *Starting to Live Differently* (2004). This was complemented by a SD action plan in October 2004. In 2006, the SDC commended the Welsh Assembly Government on its ambition and on progress made in embedding SD in decision-making and operations, while noting numerous barriers to success and considerably less delivery on the ground than might have been expected.

As in Scotland, the scene changed in 2007 with the arrival of a new government with nationalist elements. The Labour/Plaid Cymru coalition has been explicitly 'left-green' in ambition and direction. The WAG's strategy for government is set out in the document 'One Wales', and integrated in this is a new Scheme for Sustainable Development, *One Wales: One Planet* (WAG, 2009). This is one of only three legally binding plans anywhere in the world.

This Scheme is radical. The WAG has committed itself to making annual 3 per cent cuts in carbon emissions, has set targets for new low-carbon building standards that accelerate the timetable set for equivalent action in England and has developed a strategy for 'green jobs' in a low-carbon economy. It aims for a huge cut in fossil fuel dependency (80-90% by 2030), and a

correspondingly large increase in the use of renewables. Wales wants to become largely self-sufficient through renewable energy within 20 years, and around 2% of Welsh land, mostly in currently forested areas, could be earmarked for wind farms. Wales will also develop marine and biomass energy sources. It aims for a recycling rate of 70% by 2025. South Wales is designated as a 'low carbon region', with some 40,000 social housing properties to be given energy efficiency and microgeneration upgrades.

What remains unclear is how far the WAG needs more devolved powers in order to deliver on the promise of its SD Scheme. Much depends on the transfer of resources from the UK tax base and on collaboration with centres of excellence across the whole UK. It is also unclear whether the impact of recession and the urgent need for job creation will dilute some of the commitments made in "One Wales, One Planet".

For example, a review has been announced of the planning system, in order to 'streamline' its operation and make sure it is 'ready to support the economic upturn when it comes'. This could be the equivalent of measures brought forward in the English 'sub-national' system to make the planning system more amenable to economic growth, regardless of the aspirations on sustainability and action on climate and environmental protection enshrined in current planning guidance and overall strategy. Happily, the Welsh review was announced alongside a strong commitment to action on 'green jobs', support for 'sustainable economic development' and climate change.

4.4 SCALE AND SD IN SCOTLAND AND WALES

One feature of Whitehall over recent decades is the degree of centralisation of policy-making and accountability for governance systems in England. Whatever its impact on efficiency and the modernisation agenda, this level of central control has made for much greater complexity and much greater scope for dis-integrated policymaking in Whitehall. There is just so much for Departments to handle, and so much formal and media accountability for activities happening a long way away from London. The scale and detail has become almost unmanageable, and certainly makes policy coordination harder to do since Ministers and officials have not only to deal with 'big pictures', but also with the details of a myriad smaller pictures. Such a system means that time and mental space for considering systemic issues (including coordination for SD) are in short supply.

By comparison, Wales and Scotland may well be close to the 'Goldilocks' ('just right') scale for doing SD. A common refrain from policymakers in Edinburgh and Cardiff is that it is much easier than in Whitehall to bring all the relevant stakeholders round the table, and to grasp the linkages between production, consumption and wellbeing that are at the heart of a rigorous understanding of unsustainable and sustainable forms of development. The connections between energy, food, environment and economy are more visible at the scale of small countries, as they are too at local level. The scale of the two countries means that a 'systems understanding' of the processes

underpinning the economy may be easier to gain. There are important lessons here about the significance for SD in England of a coherent sub-national settlement and planning regime (see Chapter 5).

However, there is also a downside here. With such streamlined administrations (there are only six members of the Scottish Cabinet), there is also limited capacity to tackle complex issues, or even to do more than a relatively small number of things at the same time. This is reflected throughout the respective civil services arrangements in both Scotland and Wales.

4.5 NORTHERN IRELAND

Change in Northern Ireland remains painfully slow. Two years after the renewal of devolution in 2007, the growing public frustration at the Executive's inertia is palpable. The nature of NI's coalition government has led to a chronic log-jam in both policy and process. Announcements have been dominated by populist decisions (such as the costly deferrals of water charges and rates increases), while on issues where there are differences or difficulties between the leading parties in the Executive, stasis sets in.

Despite having enacted a statutory duty on SD, and the subsequent adoption of a clear statement of intent within the new Programme for Government, real achievements by the Executive on sustainable development in Northern Ireland are all but invisible. "First Steps Towards Sustainability" (Northern Ireland's first Sustainable Development Strategy, adopted in May 2006 prior to the resumption of devolution) has been in limbo, but there is now a clear timetable for publishing on new SD strategy.

The Public Services Agreements Framework within the Programme for Government is threaded through with sustainability targets on everything from halting the rise in obesity levels through sustainable procurement and investment decisions to the alleviation of fuel poverty. Yet halfway through the life of this Programme, there has been very limited progress against these targets. Despite calls within the NI Assembly for the revision of the Programme for Government in the light of changing global economics, the First & Deputy First Ministers have consistently reaffirmed their commitment to its content and its unambiguous ambition of 'growing the economy'.

Despite some more encouraging signs recently of an increased commitment to the use of renewable energy, of fresh thinking around sustainable mobility and of heightened ambitions for low-carbon construction, it remains difficult to see how the Government will attain many of its targets on SD. The simple truth is that Northern Ireland remains miles behind the rest of the UK on basic environmental regulation, let alone full-blown sustainable development.

This is due, in part, to a flawed architecture for SD in government. Many would say that Northern Ireland is significantly "over-governed". For a population of around 1.7 million people, there are 3 MEPs, 18 Westminster

MPs, 108 members of the Legislative Assembly, and 582 local councillors in 26 district councils although plans are now far advanced to reduce the number of Councils from 26 to 14.

There are 11 government departments, with key SD functions widely dispersed. One department is responsible for climate change policy, but energy and economic development sit in another, transport in a third. Building regulations are located in a different department from housing policy, and both are separate from the government's design policy on the built environment. In addition, the problems of 'variable geometry' (see 4.7) have been exposed all too visibly in NI. For example, the ambitions of the UK Climate Change Act have largely been ignored. While Scotland, Wales and, indeed, Ireland have all introduced exacting emissions reduction targets, there are no new commitments in NI.

The SDC's small team tries to maintain an overview of SD initiatives across this system, to celebrate best practice and encourage more of it. The SDC also provides a conduit to some innovative SD initiatives taking place in civil society, where real achievement often runs ahead of government. As in Scotland and Wales, the modest scale of NI makes it easier to build broad stakeholder networks; one such is the diverse coalition promoting NI's version of the Green New Deal. The group includes organisations as distinct as the CBI and the main Trades Unions, the farmers' representatives and the environmental NGOs, as well as the SDC itself.

4.6 DEVOLUTION AS A BREAK FROM PATH-DEPENDENCY

The problem of 'path-dependence' in policy-making has already been noted in Chapter 2. One way of addressing it is to make a fresh start with governance in a particular territory or policy area. Scotland and Wales have had a bigger 'fresh start' than anywhere else in the UK, with more autonomy than any region or locality enjoys in England. New institutions have been created and new voting systems introduced. The effect has been to shake up politics and open up new political 'space' for innovations in governance (such as Scotland's cabinet government by theme rather than by department). By contrast, the English scene is one of confused and piecemeal incremental change at regional and local level, with changes in formal governance structures unmatched by devolution of power and money as in the Devolved Administrations.

The break with previous governmental 'paths' also has a political dimension. It is in the interests of all the parties, not just the nationalist parties, to emphasise the differentiation of their institutions from those of distant London. Seeking means of political "distancing" from London is part of the new political competition – hence, for example, the moves in Scotland to make sharp breaks with UK policy on student finance and old-age care. This has had its effects too with SD. Going further and faster than Whitehall on renewable energy in Scotland, or on green building standards in Wales, has become part of the process of political differentiation - although it has to be pointed out that

the biggest contribution to Scotland's "lead" on renewable energy has been the UK-wide Renewables Obligation which has delivered a lot more money to fund wind power in Scotland which Scotland could not have funded itself.

There is also a good fit between the particular economic and physical circumstances of Wales and Scotland and much of the SD agenda, especially concerning climate change policy. Both nations have seen much of their old employment base destroyed as mines and factories have closed; and both are richly endowed with the basis for renewable energy networks and with the means for promotion of sustainable tourism and new approaches to land use (restoration of old industrial land, for example). Both these areas of concern come together in meeting the imperative of transitioning to a low-carbon economy, and also play to the heightened consciousness of national distinctiveness and rooted identity in the land and the heritage of the two nations. So SD provides important ingredients, potentially at least, for a modernised national 'story' about where each country is going and where it has come from. Such potential is less obvious, and has been much less exploited, in England.

4.7 VARIABLE GEOMETRY: PROS AND CONS

The great gain therefore from 'variable geometry' in the new devolved system is that political space has opened up for innovation in Scotland and Wales in particular, and that there has been a potentially helpful break with 'path-dependence'. What is possible from all this is the promise of all federal systems, namely that particular regions or states can be laboratories for policy changes that could be taken up and adapted elsewhere. Scotland and Wales could enlarge policymakers' sense of the politically possible in relation to SD. It is too early to say what the lasting gains might be in the future, and it is only fair to point out that things are as yet not all that different in terms of delivered improvements against shared SD indicators.

There are problems too. So far, rather than there being a sense of collective endeavour for SD alongside the diversity of approaches, there is a strong impression that they are energetically pursuing their own agendas without much reference to Whitehall, and vice versa. The SDC has an important role in keeping Scotland and Wales and Whitehall in touch with one another over SD strategies and policy experience, and in maintaining a sense of common cause in the spirit of *"One Future, Different Paths"*.

A related issue is that even if there are important lessons to be learned from Scotland and Wales, the English regions and localities are poorly placed to take them up and apply them. "Variable geometry" in the new UK 'settlement' has not been symmetrical. In England, the regions and local authorities have had upheaval but no significant transfers of power, resources and responsibility.

5. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL IN ENGLAND

5.1 CHANGES IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

The New Labour government came to power in 1997 with a professed commitment to re-empowering local government which had been stripped of powers, confidence and money-raising capacity for two decades. It also had a similar commitment to making a reality of regional governance. The two policies had to be coordinated somehow, as a new regional tier - including the possibility of elected assemblies - would require the loss of one of the local tiers: either county or district / borough.

Twelve years on, local government is still being reorganised (through the creation in 2009 of new unitary councils in selected areas), and regional governance is again being overhauled. Coherence and a definitive 'settlement' for sub-national governance still eludes the Government, and this has had serious consequences for the standing and effectiveness of policies for Sustainable Development at the local and regional level in England. That said, as we will see, there is now an infrastructure for sustainable development at the local level that promises to be effective provided local authorities feel empowered enough to use it, and are given appropriate levels of financial autonomy to make it work.

5.1.1 THE REGIONAL TIER

The regional tier did not develop in the way the Government intended. Regionally elected assemblies were an idea whose time came and then immediately went the moment a referendum in the North-East in 2005 emphatically rejected the proposition. Regional governance was split between Government Offices, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), and Regional Assemblies comprising leading players in local government and representatives of the so-called 'Social and Economic Partners'. RDAs and Assemblies produced a complex variety of plans, strategies, monitoring frameworks and stakeholder consultations. This regional 'constitution' was of baffling opacity and questionable effectiveness.

RDA Board members are appointed by Ministers in BIS/DTI/BERR, and owe their loyalty primarily to Whitehall. They were, however, and still are, strongly influenced by the RDAs' initial statutory purposes which included the obligation to "contribute to sustainable development wherever appropriate". Needless to say, that qualifying phrase did not help - exactly when would sustainable development not be appropriate? - and led inevitably to very different levels of commitment and understanding in the different Regions.

The box below gives the latest summary from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) of RDAs' role and remit. It represents a welcome move away from earlier formulations exclusively emphasising increases in

growth rates per region, with SD as one theme among others. This “mandating” for SD through RDAs is one of the clearest interventions by central government since 1997, and could have had an even bigger influence than it has had if it had not been contradicted (and sometimes completely undone) by even more powerful mandates from DTI/BERR to pursue conventional economic growth regardless of its impact on sustainable development. More is said on this below.

Box - Summary of RDAs’ roles and remit:

Their primary role is as strategic drivers of regional economic development in their region. The RDAs aim to co-ordinate regional economic development and regeneration, enable the regions to improve their relative competitiveness, and reduce the imbalance that exists within and between regions.

Under the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998, each Agency has five statutory purposes, which are:

- To further economic development and regeneration
- To promote business efficiency, investment and competitiveness
- To promote employment
- To enhance development and application of skill relevant to employment
- To contribute to sustainable development

The RDAs' agenda includes regeneration, taking forward regional competitiveness, taking the lead on inward investment and, working with regional partners, ensuring the development of a skills action plan to ensure that skills training matches the needs of the labour market.

Source: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

Mixed messages have been a feature of regional and local policy in relation to SD and the economy for many years. The 2007 Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR) provides perhaps the most striking illustration of this. The SNR (which led on to the “Prosperous Places” consultation document and the new Act) has redrawn the regional map. The Regional Assemblies have gone, replaced by less directly accountable “Leaders’ Forums” drawn from local government, and with no Social and Economic Partners to provide the limited leavening that they were able to do before. Regional Champion Bodies (some of which were located within their Regional Assemblies) have seen their funding cut, and some may well cease to exist over the next couple of years. Government Offices have been slimmed down, and have a somewhat limited mandate to promote sustainable development, although their role in negotiating Local Area Agreements with Local Authorities has been significant. Regional Development Agencies have

had their budgets slashed, and have been instructed to pursue “a relentless focus on economic growth” , at the same time as they take on shared responsibility for producing a new Single Regional Strategy that amounts (according to the latest guidance) to an integrated SD plan.

There are basically two competing goals for RDAs: conventional economic growth and sustainable development. Each region continues to juggle them or try to find ways to unify them, in rhetoric if not in consistent practice. On top of all that, there is great uncertainty about what a different Government from 2010 would keep of the new architecture, if anything. (London is a special case, having elements of a Devolved Administration, a separate region and a large local authority).

5.1.2 THE LOCAL LEVEL

As for local government, it has been treated with suspicion by central governments for decades. In theory, the 1997 Labour Government wanted to devolve power, but having been kept away from it for 18 years, was reluctant to do so in practice, especially to local authorities that had been demoralised and de-skilled in many respects for two decades or more. The New Labour years have seen a process of gradual devolution of autonomy to local councils (‘earned autonomy’), heavily qualified by continued capping of council tax, by a regime of central performance targets, and by a tough audit regime.

As far as local authorities themselves are concerned, there has been a resilient culture of advocacy and practice of sustainable development, encouraged by many innovative officers and elected members since the introduction of Local Agenda 21 in the early 1990s. There is a toolkit for sustainable development at local level that enables committed officers and councillors to make real progress. Moreover, the piecemeal reform of local government under various ‘modernisation’ initiatives has somehow produced what I have come to see as a “proxy duty” for SD that has the potential to enable considerable progress.

5.2 LOCAL AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS: PRINCIPLES AND STRUCTURES

As noted above, the regional framework for SD has changed dramatically as a result of the SNR. Previously, SD was a cross-cutting priority for integration in the various high-level plans and strategies (such as the Regional Economic Strategy) produced by the RDAs and Assemblies. To ensure coherence and compliance, there were Regional Observatories to gather data and evidence, Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks (RSDFs) to provide overall systems for monitoring progress, and different versions of stakeholder consultative groups and ‘Regional Champion Bodies’ (RCBs) whose role was to be akin to regional versions of the SDC - critical friends and watchdogs, albeit with only a fraction of the resources and far less recognition in the

system. The RCBs vary greatly in scale, resources and effectiveness, and their role is in flux as a result of the present reorganisations at regional level.

All this created an alphabet soup without rival in UK governance, not to mention organisational charts of impenetrable complexity. Most importantly, perhaps, nothing has been done to address the “democratic deficit” that has been the “Achilles Heel” of regional governance ever since the rejection of the attempt to introduce directly-elected Assemblies.

In the new system, following the SNR, there is to be just one strategy at regional level, an integrated plan bringing together land use, economy and various environmental priorities within an overall sustainable development framework. In theory, this represents a strong signal about the role of SD as the basic organising principle for regional governance and policy. Whether this is ever fully implemented (and succeeds in establishing priority for SD over the drive for economic growth targets) remains to be seen.

In local government, the scene is more settled, and there is by now a comprehensive system of SD policy machinery that, on the face of it, ought to encourage accelerated progress towards sustainability. SD is embedded clearly as the key “organising principle” for local government, to be implemented through Sustainable Community Strategies (SCS), setting out the overall ‘vision’ for the area within a SD framework, Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements. These are supplemented by Local Development Frameworks, the expression in spatial planning of the SCS.

The Planning system now works with a set of Planning Policy Statements (PPS) that give guidance on many policy areas relevant to SD, such as climate change adaptation, promotion of renewable energy systems, sustainable waste management, and so on. The Code for Sustainable Homes is a pioneering attempt, to develop a planning tool that covers critical sustainability criteria for new houses. The 2016 target for Zero Carbon Homes has been one of the most decisive interventions by central government over the last 12 years, with “milestones” on the way to that target embedded in the planning regulations.

The planning system now provides a reasonably consistent and powerful toolkit to guide planners and to give support to those working for sustainable outcomes in waste management, transport, energy systems and housing.

The action plan for the SCS is the Local Area Agreement (LAA), which sets targets (against a set of agreed National Indicators) and agreements for how to meet them between the local authority and Government Offices (acting on behalf of central government departments). The SCS and the LAA are ‘owned’ by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), which brings together the local authority with major local partners in public, private and voluntary sectors. LSPs are thus bound into a framework of SD for the area - in theory at any rate. Councils also have a Power of Wellbeing enabling them to take

action as they see fit to promote the sustainable development and wellbeing of their area.

Most importantly, performance and progress are to be assessed under the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) system of the Audit Commission. Unlike its predecessor, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), the CAA will make sustainable development its key criterion of progress. The Audit Commission will also make a priority of assessing performance on climate action.

In addition, most councils will, from 2010, come under the Carbon Reduction Commitment, a mandatory trading scheme for emissions reductions that will provide a financial incentive for authorities to cut their carbon footprint.

5.3 LOCAL AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS: PROGRESS AND PRACTICE

The system thus offers in theory a coherent and powerful set of tools to promote SD. What about the practice? The “proxy duty” for SD that has emerged is complex but comprehensive and does provide real incentives for action now that SD and climate action are embedded firmly in the Audit Commission’s new CAA process, in the LAA system, and in the Carbon Reduction Commitment. The signals provided to council leaders and chief executives may well be “unignorable” now. There are oft-cited and admirable examples of innovation for SD and for climate action - as in Woking, Kirklees and a few other pioneering places.

The progress made in recycling and diversion of waste from landfill reflects some of this process in action. The Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme provides a strong financial incentive for avoidance of landfilling of waste, to supplement the environmental case for waste minimisation, more reuse and recycling and elimination of landfill. This indicates what could be done in relation to energy saving and sustainable energy systems if instruments such as the Carbon Reduction Commitment can provide a similarly strong financial signal to local authorities about climate change adaptation and mitigation. But a number of significant problems remain, accounting for the fact that so few outstanding UK local pioneers of SD exist, and none of the importance of overseas cities such as Freiburg or Portland.

First, local government experiences all the problems inherent in the concept of SD and in the process of ‘Joining Up’ outlined in Chapter 2 above.

Second, local authorities have a great many responsibilities to discharge, and a diminishing set of resources with which to act on them. Even before the economic crash of 2008, councils were heavily constrained by capping of council tax rises, demands from Whitehall for major efficiency gains, and lack of scope for fund-raising and for capital investment (except via the PFI, which has largely failed to make SD a priority in its criteria for funding and design).

Third, local capacity for 'doing SD' has been severely limited by the buffeting of local government over the past generation. The Power of Well-being has been used but rarely, symptomatic of a sense of "learned helplessness" at worst and risk aversion at best in many areas. CEOs and Leaders have been overwhelmingly concerned with meeting central targets and demands for efficiency savings, tasks usually accompanied by wholesale reorganisations that displace staff and detract from attention to policy and to service quality. Much progress in SD in general and climate action in particular has been found to depend on 'wilful individuals' who have managed to innovate in spite of constraints, or who have had the confidence to use the local SD "Proxy Duty" outlined above. Capacity has also been limited by lack of resources, confusion, lack of leadership from the top in many councils, and poor skills for 'doing SD'.

Fourth, local authorities need new sources of finance to become innovators in sustainable infrastructure, just as they were once innovators in municipal systems in the 19th century. Local councils need to have a key role in enabling the development of sustainable, decentralised energy systems and other infrastructure for low-carbon living. They need the planning skills and tools for this, but crucially also the skills and capacity to raise funds for joint work with utilities and new energy enterprises to create resilient and effective new systems such as Combined Heat and Power networks.

Fifth, in pressing for efficiency gains from councils, Whitehall has so far largely ignored the scope for SD to provide a positive framework for change. An article in the *Municipal Journal* in March 2009 on efficiency savings by John Healey (the "architect" of the Sub-National Review when he was in the Treasury, prior to his move to the Department for Communities and Local Government, and one of the Ministers most notoriously hostile to SD throughout his time in government) managed to avoid mentioning SD, energy efficiency or climate change at all! Yet the need for efficiency savings should prompt a parallel search for all sorts of efficiency gains, re-designing services to cut lifetime costs and impacts at the same time. The messages about efficiency tend to push Councils towards a narrow notion of what efficiency is, ignoring the need to consider the efficiency of resource use and the scope for rethinking whole *systems* of activity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the planning system suffers from a clash between the theoretical commitment to SD now embedded in its machinery, and twin political pressures for economic growth on the one hand and rejection of new developments on the other. Spatial planning is one of the key arenas for SD policy and practice. It is where the conflicts between the established economic model of progress and wealth creation and the SD model are most evident. Yet it is also the place where creative innovation for integrated solutions can be pursued, where inevitable trade-offs can be debated, and decisive changes made so that new developments necessary for SD - such as renewable energy systems - can be agreed on and compensating investments made where ecological, social and economic damage is incurred as a result.

The guidance is there, but, in practice, planning departments and local councillors have yet to follow it on a large scale. All too often, there has been a combination of ready agreement to hasty new development that promises jobs ('shed' clusters and large supermarkets, for example) and rejection of anything deemed unusual, politically problematic or too innovative ('green' housing, renewable energy systems, or energy from waste schemes).

Frustrated by the latter tendency and by resistance also to big plans for roads, airport extensions and so on, the Government has introduced a new Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) to streamline the system when major developments are in question. The IPC will 'deliver a unified, streamlined approach to planning – one that will take into account economic, environmental and social factors to ensure sustainable development'. Critics see in the IPC a means of imposing unpopular and potentially unsustainable developments on localities. Government sees it as a way of modernising and speeding up a sclerotic and often perverse local system.

What is clear is that the governance of the IPC will be crucial to acceptance of its decisions and to the quality of the development it promotes. How independent will it be, and what systems will it use to assess the sustainability of proposed projects? The IPC needs to live up to its declared commitment to SD, and to be clear that it will make decisions based on systematic assessment of how planned developments fit with the Government's overall vision for SD and with the carbon budgets and targets set under the Climate Change Act.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the situation in Scotland and Wales, this is a complex patchwork and has not benefited from a clear and energising 'fresh start' settlement. Much progress has been made for SD by committed and innovative people throughout local and regional governance, but all too often it has been made in spite of the system and not because of it. We still lack a coherent system of local and regional governance for England.

That said, the post-SNR settlement could yet produce some progress in terms of building on what has already been done. The rationalisation of plans is to be welcomed and, in effect, the proposed Single Regional Strategy should be seen as a regional SD plan. It is also important to note that despite the problems of the regional system in general, all the regions have made major efforts to integrate SD into their decision-making and operations, encouraged by the 'champion bodies' and by effective advocates on the Boards of the RDAs. Some have downplayed the priority given to 'growth' per se, as in the South East, which has been making use of alternative measures of progress towards what it calls 'sustainable prosperity'. Elsewhere, eco- and carbon footprints have been produced, and projects developed for low-carbon economic development and new jobs.

There is also scope for progress at the sub-regional level. Some issues and spatial planning questions are too big for individual local authorities, but also do not fit the large scale of policy at regional level. These include planning issues concerning major transport schemes, waste management and minimisation, sustainable economic regeneration of areas that span several authorities, major decentralised energy systems, and climate change adaptation. The post-SNR system includes the potential for setting up Multi-Area Agreements, allowing for coordinated action and funding between several neighbouring authorities, and Government is experimenting with partnerships of urban authorities that provide for 'city-region' governance of major strategic issues and investments. So it's not all as muddled as it sometimes looks!

6 FINAL THOUGHTS

Mix together all the non-negotiable imperatives: an ultra-low-carbon economy; sustainable economic growth (as in the Treasury's definition on page 4); living within our environmental means; dramatic reductions in health inequalities, fuel poverty and child poverty; thriving eco-systems, and resilient ways of producing the food we need. Add in the "highly desirables" such as a better work-life balance, a first-class education for all young people, diverse, vibrant communities, improved wellbeing for the population as a whole, and continuing commitments on aid, development and global disarmament. And what have you got?

A rhetorical question, obviously. But it is that combination (the things about which we have no choice if we're to avoid a miserable decline in our quality of life, and things that everyone would like to see more of in their own lives) that makes sustainable development, at some stage, both inevitable and a no-brainer.

If only it were that easy! As this Report demonstrates, there has been a lot of progress over the last 15 years or so, and a lot of politicians are now seriously engaged in moving us towards a more sustainable society. But progress is still so much slower than it needs to be. Ian Christie (who has played such a critical part in pulling together the analysis behind this publication) ruefully acknowledges some of the deeper reasons "for the stubborn fact of the unattractiveness of sustainable development as an integrating idea in politics: close association with green politics, academia and NGO culture, all alien to mainstream parties and citizens; clunky language and a lack of scope for simplicity and for sound-bites; and sustainable development being such a "sprawling" idea, with no boundaries, where everything is relevant, from a full-scale ideological worldview to a toolkit of assessment techniques."

He's right about all that. But on a good day, I can see all these barriers melting away in the face of growing awareness and growing citizen engagement. Successful politicians have always been able to "read" gathering social trends, and there's much in the pre-election positioning of all the major parties that reveals an increased readiness to start addressing today's pressing challenges in a very different way. Everyone, for instance, is into some kind of "relocalisation" agenda, which must surely include increased power for local authorities to turn the rhetoric of sustainable communities into real improvements for people in their daily lives.

And everyone is signed up to hugely ambitious low-carbon targets. It's true that there is still limited traction on this, at the moment, but this will undoubtedly start getting real for much larger numbers of people in the very near future.

And a significant number of politicians in all parties are at last beginning to question the wisdom of business-as-usual economic growth, more and more mindful of the cost that this kind of growth is now causing. That little word "wellbeing" keeps popping up as a potential rival for GDP, and it is not

unreasonable to assume that we will see some significant progress on the “rethinking economic growth” agenda over the next 5 years.

Finally mundane though it may be, what I’ve described in this Report as the “governance architecture for sustainable development in the UK” is also highly significant. You can’t do the smart stuff (policy development, effective advocacy and so on) if you can’t do the basic stuff. In the last couple of years, all governments in the UK have indeed started to take this much more seriously, and in Whitehall there is now a welcome readiness to ramp up the ambition level on targets, management systems and procurement.

The SDC has been at the heart of all those developments, both big and small, and has helped many parts of Government to raise their game. At the same time, it holds Departments and individual Ministers to account, and continues to exercise its “agent provocateur” remit as and when appropriate.

It was a real privilege to be the inaugural Chair of such a body – the value of which I believe now speaks for itself. And I have no doubt that its role over the next decade will become even more critical.

¹ Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, “A Better Quality of Life”, 1999

² HM Treasury, “Statement of Intent on Environmental Taxation”, 1997

³ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), “Our Future Different Paths”, 2005

⁴ Tim Jackson, “Prosperity Without Growth”, Sustainable Development Commission, March 2009 (www.sd-commission.org.uk)

⁵ Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), “Prosperous Places”, November 2008

⁶ Sustainable Development Commission, “Sharing The Value: a Sustainable Approach to the Modernisation Agenda, January 2005

⁷ Defra, “Securing The Future”, 2005

⁸ Ibid

⁹ “Sustainable Development in Scotland”, 2nd Assessment Report, Sustainable Development Commission for Scotland, 2009