

# Environmental Politics in the 21st Century

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There is a revolution occurring in the ways in which people and their organisations deal with environmental concerns. It affects all types of organisations: national governments, international bodies, and business and citizen's groups. It has been taking place over roughly the last decade, but has been little noticed because environmental concerns directly effect only a small minority of people, and these concerns take different forms in different sectors. The purpose of this paper is to examine that revolution and to offer some conjecture as to where it is heading.

The first wave of popular concern for the environment built up slowly over the 1960s from an event which environmentalists' mythology names as the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 (Carson 1962). This book said that widespread and indiscriminate use of pesticides was killing large numbers of birds in the United States. If we honour the myth, then the modern environmental movement was 30 years old in 1992.

The late-1960s and early-1970s saw the establishment of environment ministries in the "developed" North and the passage of much regulation to "protect" the natural environment from the effects of industrial development. Internationally this activity came to a climax at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. It put the environment on the international political agenda; it too saw environmental problems largely as caused by industry and progress. Thus so-called "developing", or "Southern", countries felt that they had few environmental problems and tended to view the whole exercise with considerable suspicion, fearing it was yet another attempt by the North to apply conditions to aid in particular and the development process in general.

The oil price shocks of the 1970s removed the environment from the front line of international concern. Then in 1982, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) held a special meeting in Nairobi to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Stockholm. Most of the speeches at this meeting suggested that industrial countries had improved their environmental situations over the past decade, but developing countries had slid backwards, now facing serious non-industrial challenges such as loss of forests and of productive soils. Yet the unregulated industries of the South were also creating serious air and water pollution problems in the capital cities.

While air and water quality might have improved in the North, these countries in the south were causing new, transborder and even global problems in the form of acid rain, ozone depletion and climate change.

Leaders both inside governments and inside the UN system were losing confidence in the ability of the poorly funded and poorly staffed UNEP to cope with these challenges. So the UN Secretary General was persuaded to establish in late-1983 an independent "World Commission on Environment and Development" (WCED) to report to the UN on these issues and possible solutions. The title of this group is important. It had originally been intended to call it the "World Commission on the Environment", but it was realised that it was nonsensical to examine environment effects without examining causes, most of which lay in modes of development or progress.

The commission was headed by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, who had trained as a doctor and had been her country's environment minister. She appointed 21 other commissioners: past and present political office holders, top scientists and leading international bureaucrats. These included the Minister of Finance of Zimbabwe, the Minister of Environment and Population of Indonesia, and the Minister of Marine Affairs of the Ivory Coast (who attended only once). There was a former head of the US Environmental Protection Agency, a former Minister of Agriculture of Nigeria, and former Japanese Foreign Minister.

The nature of these people is important. They were not environmental advocates, but experienced, mostly older, establishment politicians. They would all have to defend their findings before their colleagues and governments in their own countries. They worked for three years, held public hearings on five continents, and listened to a great many people. They established a secretariat in Geneva to gather data. Many changed their minds on many issues.

Their final report, *Our Common Future*, was published in 1987 (WCED 1987). Its primary, and perhaps its most startling message, given its authors, is that much of what people on the planet are doing in the names of progress and development is unsustainable. If the human race continues to seek progress through these activities, then the environmental basis from progress and for survival itself will be damaged. There had been similar messages in the environmentalist literature for the previous quarter of a century. But this was the first such carefully researched message from a UN-appointed, independent commission.

The commissioners offered relatively simple and compelling examples. They noted that much of the world's energy is produced by burning fossil fuels. During the mid-1980s, the human population was burning the equivalent of about 10 billion tonnes of coal per year. If per capita use stays the same and the population increases to 8.2 billion by the year 2025, as expected, then the global population will be burning the equivalent of 14 billion tonnes of coal per year.

Present scientific consensus suggests that the atmosphere, and thus many of the life forms it supports, cannot stand the present rates of carbon emissions from fossil fuels, much less a 40 per cent increase in 35 years. But the Commission went on to point out that if the whole world began using energy at the present rates prevalent in industrialised countries—that is, if this thing called "development" actually happened—then humans would be burning the equivalent of 55 billion tonnes of coal annually by the year 2025.

Obviously, either the "developing world" cannot be allowed to develop and the

North must use a lot less fossil-fuel energy, or development must be fuelled more efficiently and by different, less polluting forms of energy.

The Commission offered the same sorts of calculations for other sectors such as agriculture, industry, forestry, and fisheries. It also noted that the present rate of reproduction by the human species is one of its most unsustainable activities.

The commissioners did not document various examples of “unsustainability” willingly or happily, for most of them had spent their adult lives pushing the policies and practices that underpinned these dead-end paths. So as not to produce a report full of gloom and doom and lacking in solutions, the Commission chose as its overall theme the ill-defined notion of “Sustainable Development”, which it defined simply as forms of progress which “meet the needs of the present without compromising future generations’ ability to meet their needs.”

The commissioners found themselves deriving a lot of fairly radical conclusions from this goal of sustainability. They concluded – most controversially from the point of view of many environmentalists – that sustainable development requires rapid and major economic growth. One obvious reason why they said this is that a doubled world population next century obviously requires something very like economic growth to survive; growth will also be required to improve the lot of the over one billion people mired in poverty and unable to meet their basic needs.

But they concluded that there were “no inherent limits to growth”, but that growth was limited by technology and social organisation. In other words, the planet may in theory use all the energy it wants, as long as this energy does not over-use resources or overburden ecosystems with pollution, as our present carbon-based energy systems are doing. New technologies are required. Second, economic growth is of little help in societies which impoverish the majority of their members while minorities get the benefits of growth. New social organisations are needed.

Most revolutionary was the first prerequisite they listed for sustainable development: a “political system based on effective citizen participation in decision-making”. They were not guided in this choice by human rights considerations, but by practicality. History shows that the only nations to achieve any real progress in the first wave of environmental concern in the late-1960s and early-1970s were the democracies. Their people were able to learn of environmental problems from a free press; to form groups to protest, and ultimately to vote the rascals out. Also, the real “environmental decision-makers” are not the legislators but the individuals who daily decide such things as how to farm, how to dispose of their rubbish, or how big a car to drive. Thus they must feel involved in the decision-making process.

The notion that participatory democracy is a prerequisite for sustainable development is radical because, at the time that the WCED was working, so few nations had any such system. Since then, democracy has made great gains in South America, Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, and has made less spectacular but noticeable gains in Africa. Yet the oldest democracies are having difficulties working environmental concern into their own political systems. The environment has simply not been a major issue in recent elections during the early-1990s in Europe and North America.

Security and the arms race were issues which the Commission also found necessary to discuss, although many commissioners tried to resist doing so. Yet the consensus was that there could be no sustainable development in a world that spent \$1,000 billion on arms each year, in which half of all research and development budgets went to military work, and in which the lives of half a million scientists were devoted to the military. They called for a new definition of security, one based at least in part on environmental security.

Global pollution problems such as climate change and ozone depletion mean that for the first time ever, the poorer, weaker nations have the power to physically damage the wealthy, strong nations. And there is nothing, in terms of traditional armed defence responses, that the latter can do about this threat to their security.

If the poor but populous Southern states continue upon a carbon-based industrial development path, then the ports of Europe and North America will be flooded. Agricultural patterns will change, to the detriment of Northern Europe and North America. The traditional "arms culture" defence response is of no help against this palpable threat to our security. We can hardly propose to "smart bomb" the coal-fired power stations of China.

The only defence against the security threat is the development of clean technology in the North and the transfer of this technology to the South. I do not mean a give-away of hardware. The South is littered with rusting and unused bits of hardware which aid programmes have dumped there: tractors, irrigation equipment, pumps, etc. Technology can only be transferred successfully to those able to pay for, maintain and use it. This means that the North must do everything in its power to bring real development to the South.

Since the report was published, the Cold War has ended and there remains at least the possibility of a peace dividend which could be spent on progress in sustainable development.

I have spent so much space on the conclusions of the WCED because I believe they best represent the new thinking on the environment. I am not suggesting that this work was original to the WCED, but I believe *Our Common Future* best sums up and reflects this thinking. Before it was published, there was already a trend among development groups, such as Britain's OXFAM, to be concerned about the environmental poverty that was making development impossible in large parts of Africa. Environmental groups were becoming concerned about development issues. For example, the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) began to campaign on debt issues in the mid-1980s because it saw how efforts to repay debt were forcing indebted governments to over-use environmental resources, such as forests. It is now virtually impossible for any responsible non-governmental organisation to campaign solely on issues of the environment, or solely on those of development; the two are now linked under the issue of sustainable development.

What this means is that the notion of "protecting the environment" or "saving the environment" has become outmoded. It is obvious that the environment cannot somehow be separated, or fenced off, from the activities of people. For example, if a rainforest were completely protected from human incursion, and if people went on

producing energy by present techniques, then the forest would eventually perish due to climate change.

Thus the present focus is on how to bring human activities more in line with natural laws, given that natural laws cannot be changed. But sustainable development also incorporates the concerns of other special interest groups. Its focus on participation in decision-making and brings in human rights groups. Its concern for security brings in peace groups. Its requirement for international cooperation on international pollution brings in groups focusing on international understanding.

To test this idea that virtually all pressure groups were "sustainable development" groups, my own institute—the International Institute for Environment and Development—organised meetings of such disparate bodies as Friends of the Earth (environment), WWF-UK (species and environment), World Development Movement (development), OXFAM (development), Survival International (protection of tribal people), Quaker Peace and Service (peace) and the United Nations Association (international cooperation). These groups worked together to produce a powerful report on the British NGO view of sustainable development for Britain. Their reports encouraged the government to respond with its own official reaction to the Brundtland report (IIED 1989).

The movement away from a narrow focus on environment has brought professions not directly concerned with environment into the sustainable development debate. Economists are beginning to develop a field "economics for sustainable development" (Pearce 1989). Legal experts are working on treaties to establish "intergenerational equity" (Weiss 1989). Business leaders are meeting together to define the relationships between the requirements of sustainable development and the requirements of business (Schmidheiny 1992).

The planners of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in mid-1992 did not learn the lessons of the Brundtland Commission. The language of the conference documents tended toward references to protecting the environment, and planners found it difficult to deal with the causes of environmental degradation. Prime Minister Brundtland, writing shortly before UNCED, noted:

Our overriding message was that sustainable development cannot be hived off into a separate ministry, company department or UN agency; it must permeate all thinking, planning and actions....There is now widespread concern that issues which the Commission found absolutely unavoidable will be dealt with inadequately at Rio. Such issues include the international economy, debt, democracy, security and population growth...The erroneous notion that sustainable development is something we should be pursuing *in addition to* other activities is reflected in some of the modest institutional proposals which have emerged during preparations for Rio. If we set up some sort of separate committee or international agency to deal with sustainable development, then there remains the grave danger that all other human institutions will feel free to pursue business as usual, which neither people nor planet could bear. (Brundtland 1992).

It is not only the UNCED delegates who have trouble adjusting to this change.

Many environmentalists and environmental groups are having a hard time making the necessary adjustments. For as long as governments and businesses cared relatively little about the environment, then it was enough for pressure groups to lobby simply to increase concern. But now that business and governments are taking these issues seriously, many are appealing to pressure groups for advice. Some of these groups are attempting to develop the capability to respond. Others are hiding behind a cloak of "purity", refusing to work with governments or industry for fear of tainting themselves.

In mid-1989 the Environment Liaison Centre International in Nairobi, a coalition of green groups, attacked the Centre for Our Common Future in Geneva in a press release for what it called "Green Pollution". It was upset that the Geneva centre was forming partnerships with business, trade unions, youth groups, etc., and thereby "polluting" the Green movement.

Yet no solutions are possible unless governments, business, pressure groups, economists, jurists, scientists and all citizens can work together towards sustainability.

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