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Professor Peter Newman,
Director, Sustainability Policy Unit,
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Dear Sir,        STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

I am writing to you about the State Sustainability Strategy for WA. Please accept what I have written below as my submission on the consultation paper. There are many aspects I wanted to remark on, as sustainability is a broad topic to cover.

I do not see the concept of sustainability as many people do, let me say at the outset. The idea that the natural/ physical environment can be preserved, or even improved, while retaining the right to have more and more materially is one that I reject, at least in present terms. Nor do I expect a Government to deliver that, though many do.

So I firstly question how sustainability is defined, what these social and economic goals are. As pointed out on page 8 of the consultation paper, the high consumption lifestyle that many aspire to, albeit encouraged by mass advertising, was highlighted as the problem in the 1998 State Environment Report.

My response to the paper has evolved over many years of informing myself and thinking over issues, not from a point in recent time alone and what I have learned is that the reason so many people want materially, despite what they may already have, is because of their own internal (psychological, spiritual) poverty.

The points I want to make can be grouped under a number of broad headings, as set out below.

MATERIALISM

What are the factors that cause rampant materialism?  I have been able to come across studies that link such things as indiscriminate television viewing and the negative aspects of mass schooling with materialism.

Conformity is tied into this, because the individual needs to have a sense of their own uniqueness, in order not to follow blindly the messages they receive from blaring tv ads. Many social factors are intertwined in promoting "having" as the answer to anything.

The media gives disproportional emphasis to the adulation of those with wealth  and for that reason alone, to an obscene extent in a world of AIDS and starvation in poor countries.

True leaders in Government should not abide this trend, but counter it. That is one of my suggestions. For materialism, to the extent we now see around us, is out of balance with the other needs that people have. These are social needs to relate to others, intellectual needs and so on.

An important aspect is that "wants" are now not the same as "needs' and are often far removed from them. Status is associated with having evermore of everything. This trend is well entrenched and it is hard to see a way out of it all, maybe even on a personal level as we are all bombarded by consumerist messages all the time. A person's qualities or efforts hardly even fit into this picture.

In general, I am pessimistic about these trends and whether they can be impacted on. In particular cases, it may be possible. Issues of waste and misuse of resources may be examples where progress can be made.

ENVIRONMENTAL

As someone who has had previous experience in trying to save natural areas, I am now much less inclined to engage in trying to do that now as although destruction can be delayed or postponed, overseas experience shows such areas become atrociously degraded anyway and then destroyed
ultimately years later.

The efforts of conservationists are often maligned or they themselves are. Those with economic interests in continuing existing practices are threatened by change.

One area I am enthusiastic about is alternative and new (nonpolluting) technology. I have noted and welcome that the State Government has an Innovate WA policy, of which I would like to know more about.

There may be more funds needed for particular areas of research or an improved climate of support and fostering ideas may be required. I would like further research into water desalinisation and associated technology, especially to reduce costs.

On the topic of genetic engineering, I am concerned about its potential environmental effects and do not support it.

There is pressure to be "upbeat" about  what is being done in retrieving the environment from degradation. Yet the biologists have sobering facts to give us and in abundance. That is the reality, so it has to be faced. I do not see Governments being able to do that as they are still having to listen to conventional economists who usually are ignorant of ecology.

I have, on many occasions, read that Perth is praised as a "clean" city. This is only in relative terms, as so many cities all over the world are so grossly polluted. There is nothing at all natural about living permanently under a cloud of smog.

I have noted the initiatives of the State Government, for example described in the consultation paper, to do something more sustainable in relation to transport or housing and welcome them. Unfortunately, with the big trends continuing that are so polluting or destructive, often they make little impact.

It is less likely  now that society as a whole can achieve sustainability, but I think that some communities can or will be able to do so. Individuals cannot achieve it on their own as it requires co-operation with others. Those groups and individuals trying to struggle on with a more social community based lifestyle, with energy efficient housing and organics are a small minority.

It is hard to relinquish a car when all around you the planning for an area is based on everyone having one.

The things people are expected to have ie a modern house, car, set of new gadgets and a house full of consumer goods are often made of materials and substances that are harmful to health (because of outgassing and fields ) and to the environment in their manufacture. It is possible to reduce the hold therefore of materialism if alternatives are seen as desirable. Local councils though may not let home builders use different materials.

It may be possible to use renewable resources in more imaginative ways and replace non-renewable, but that will still require more water to be allocated This represents an unknown area of possibilities.eg such things as grain alcohol.

SOCIAL

On the last point above, as society is increasingly fragmented, sustainability is less likely to be achieved because families, communities and relationships generally have less continuity.

On the social aspects, I am pessimistic with current trends continuing. All the information I assimilate tells me that society is degenerative, not just becoming but is so.

All social indicators support the latter point. This is in terms of abuse, violence, crime etc, of people's respect for each other.

The workplace is increasingly computerised, corporatised, alienating and dehumanising, with many negative effects on the health and well being of both individuals and their relationships. There are many overstressed workers and the frustration of hours spent with less satisfaction is linked to domestic violence, now accepted at epidemic proportions.

On the individual level, many people do not know who they are and society is failing them. They have no sense of themselves, their own individuality or uniqueness and a society that does this has no future worth having.

For aging and old people, there are no markers of life or celebrations of who they are because society (I am talking here about Western society) no longer values the accumulation of experience or wisdom, but only the latest computer package.

Our society no longer has any clear social goals. What are they? It used to be family and community. The downside to that has been thrown over but now we are muddled in our direction.
An example of this is no-fault divorce. It follows it is absurd to judge fault in relationships in traditional terms as people used to do, but people are still doing that even from the outside.

Housing demands have gone up as families and relationships have fragmented. People appear to have more problems with relationships and cannot or will not share facilities. These are factors in our impact  on the environment.


I have tried to group points into broad headings as above, but some are general, as below;

Human beings are being seen more and more in purely economic terms, which devalues the other aspects of our existence.

The social aspects are intertwined with our economic/ environmental problems, but there is an imbalance between the different aspects and the importance attached to them.

All persons who attempt to do something about the negative trends we are now experiencing, whether as individuals or in groups, themselves face sacrifice or hardship or stigmatisation.

I accept that there are gross inequities and society seems unable to redress them. There are strong  inequalities between the relative recognition of the efforts of men and women that remain and in the way they are viewed by others. This large imbalance affects many issues and is inter related to them.

I have hope for the efforts and inspiration that individuals may provide in the above issues, for that will always be an unknown and unpredictable aspect.  There are many individuals and organisations that have made significant contributions to ideas about sustainability.

Many expect Governments to manage all the issues. I do not as a Government may only be in power for a few years and will be reluctant to lose votes in taking initiatives. I believe more in community based solutions, which are more democratic anyway.

We need nature for our biological sustenance but also for our sanity. Our eyes can distinguish more shades of green than any other colour and when observing a natural scenic area, our blood pressure drops and we are calmer.

Yours sincerely,



Christine Heal