

## **Submission on the State Sustainability Strategy for Western Australia Consultation Paper**

Thankyou for the opportunity to make a submission. It is very pleasing indeed to see the State Government embracing Sustainability as a way forward and hallmark in governmental decision making, as distinct from political decision making. Political decision making has often been about seeking the path of least resistance toward the more narrowly framed notion of Political Sustainability. In other words, a 'Political decision': a decision made the object of which is to facilitate the return of the government of the day. Political decisions almost always seek an outcome within the 'political horizon' — the next election.

Decisions based on Sustainability are more complex. They are multivariate: requiring the concurrent analysis of more than one variable and across several domains. Rather than focusing on outcomes based purely on the language of economic principles, decisions based upon Sustainability require, in addition to economics, an accounting for community, society, and environment. This is well recognised these days, but also acknowledged as problematic, as it calls for a balancing or maximising of outcomes across each of these disparate domains: the so-called triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental accounting. Unfortunately, the language of economics has, to date, been very limited in its ability to provide a satisfactory methodology to account across the triple bottom line. Economists prefer to compare apples with apples — everything must be able to be ascribed a dollar value.

And, decisions based on Sustainability are 'Over the horizon' decisions — almost certainly beyond the 'Political horizon' and often beyond a 'Generational horizon'. In fact, decisions based upon the concepts of Sustainability seek to guarantee forever a future for people. The problem for Government is that, just as individuals in political parties tend to focus on the here and now, so too do individuals in society. It is this tendency towards short-term goals that clouds the vision of individuals and government when we seek to look 'over the rainbow'.

The coming of the Industrial Age led to many advances and economic and social advantages for those societies that were able to embrace them. Unfortunately, those favourable outcomes have been balanced by some unfavourable consequences that are mounting day by day. Those consequences are predominantly on the environmental side of the Sustainability ledger: in fact, the environment is well into the 'red' and heading on a rapidly escalating downward spiral. Just as the environment 'bankrolled' the Industrial revolution, it can 'bankrupt' the world's societies, causing the Earth to become uninhabitable. The environment is 'making a case' to bankrupt the Earth even as we speak.

What role for government then as a way forward to guaranteeing forever a future for people? In my submission, you should continue to embrace strongly the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development as

you have initiated with your State Sustainability Strategy. This strategy, correctly employed and engaged with the community is really the only vehicle that can deliver us 'back to the future' outcomes and a society that does not ultimately have to live in a 'Mad Max' or worse environment. Many governments would, of course, be tempted to let someone else have a go first — "We just need a couple more decades of economic growth first before we start". I implore you not to take this approach. I want my own children to live in a balanced world, let alone that they should have descendants and want the same for them.

In Australia, all 3-tiers of Government have a significant role to play in Sustainability. In Australia, as in every other Country in Earth, all tiers of Government need to account in a truly 'balanced' way their economic, social and environmental futures.

That is easy to say, yet incredibly difficult to do because no one particularly wants to sacrifice economic advantage whilst there are economic advantages to be had. The same societies though, are not particularly unhappy, or at least appear to be not particularly unhappy to sacrifice environmental advantage. A classic Western Australian example is our low level of discomfort with having to sacrifice up to a third of all our arable lands to salinity and its consequent degradation of our rural communities and fresh water supplies. The non-human impacts of loss of bio-diversity and any of the other environmental terms may warrant a mention as well. Now, compare those consequences with our high societal level of satisfaction with the economic outcomes arising out of farming for the State generally. The same example applies across State boundaries in the Murray-Darling Basin with each State initially, and possibly still, seeking to maximise its economic advantage without applying the same rigour to environmental advantage. And so it goes from country to country, with economic advantage still out gunning environmental advantage in most cases. Only in Europe does there seem to be significant general recognition that each individual country is environmentally dependent upon every other country, and that economic advantage is inextricably linked with environmental advantage: societal advantage being ultimately achievable only when the other two are satisfied.

Having said that all 3-tiers of Government in Australia have a role to play in Sustainability, and all 3-tiers need to engage in triple bottom line accounting, it is equally clear that each layer of Government has a different emphasis. The Federal Government is ultimately responsible for the Nation as a whole — security, defence, trade, and welfare, etc. To this level of Government the Sustainability (triple bottom line) emphasis is on economic outcomes. State Governments are responsible for the wider society generally — health, education, transport, law and order, etc. To this level of Government the Sustainability (triple bottom line) emphasis is on societal outcomes. Local Governments are responsible for their 'patch' — their communities, their built environment and their natural

environment. For Local Governments the Sustainability (triple bottom line) emphasis is on the environment.

In the consultation paper, nearly all of the inset examples are examples of Local Government engagement in environmental outcomes at the community level, and it is this level to which the remainder of this submission is focussed.

It is my submission that the overall mosaic of environmental outcomes can be best achieved through the empowerment of Local Governments across Australia by the passing of responsibility and accountability for local and regional environmental sustainability outcomes to Local Governments by the Federal and State Governments.

The achievement of a quantum of smaller local and regional level sustainable development outcomes, from individual households to regional developments, are all pieces of the Sustainability jigsaw. For many people the Earth size jigsaw is simply a jigsaw that is too big to contemplate, or indeed comprehend. Where sufficient individuals and individual communities can focus on a small project or projects, and this is repeated worldwide, huge positive environmental impacts can be made.

Local Government, the tier of Government closest to the people, is really the only tier of Government that can 'pull' rather than 'push' individuals and communities to engage in and embrace environmental outcomes. To empower Western Australian Local Governments, the State Government needs to resolve to relinquish some control and move some resources to the Local Government sector. By this I mean devolving or delegating some departmental/agency responsibilities to the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA). WALGA would become the body accountable for those aspects of sustainable development.

It is my submission that in so changing these responsibilities and accountabilities to better reflect the natural constituencies of each tier of governance, Western Australian society is best served into the future. It is beyond my immediate expertise to suggest the detail by which this better apportionment of responsibility can be achieved. I do, however, have great faith in the capacity of Local Government to pick up and run with this tranche of the triple bottom line of Sustainability.

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