

*Office of the*  
**PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

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Professor Peter Newman  
Department of the Premier and Cabinet  
Government of Western Australia  
197 St Georges Terrace  
Perth  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA 6000

Dear Peter

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the Western Australian Government draft sustainability strategy; *"Focus on the Future"*.

I make my brief comments from a background of investigating, as New Zealand's Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, many of the areas you and your team have addressed in the draft strategy. In 2002 my team and I assessed New Zealand's sustainability progress since the Earth summit in 1992. In doing so we did not only assess progress but, more importantly, tried to look forward and highlight the opportunities in embracing a sustainability pathway to enhance our quality of life.

Your draft strategy is a truly excellent document in many ways. A few aspects I'd like to highlight are:

- Elements of the way you went about drafting the strategy were inspirational. Yes you had a wide "talking to society process" but it was your involvement of a team of university students to prepare case studies and background papers that was, in my view the master stroke. By doing so you have deeply engaged a significant group of potential future leaders and brought in fresh thinking on the quest for sustainable human existence.
- Your sustainability framework; a set of foundation and process principles; sustainability visions; and sustainability goals and action areas provides a powerful base for making progress in what is a very challenging field for much of society.
- At the action level, there is a good mix of **capacity building** (Sustainable Round Tables, Global Centre for Sustainability, Centre for Applied Sustainability), **targeted actions** (comprehensive community education and awareness processes, sustainability planning, building and construction guides, industry sustainability covenants) recognition of the need to focus on some big **transition areas** (oil availability, taxation, subsidies and financial incentives/disincentives to sustainability, design of cities and settlements) and that Government must **"walk the talk"** (government agency sustainability action plans, sustainability assessment – the net benefit approach).

Together they should provide an enduring foundation for the Western Australian communities to continue to progress the vision. And it will be communities rather than Governments that will ultimately determine if this strategy will endure.

While the strategy covers most bases well, a few thoughts on the big challenges the strategy will face – not specific deficiencies but areas where all participants will need to be brutally honest about the changes that are needed.

The big one for me lies within our current financial and economic systems. They are where the biggest influences on long term sustainability lie; the taxes, policies, investment and market behaviour and practices that continue to incentivise unsustainable behaviours. You acknowledge that in chapter 8 but designing transitions in the realm in the wider national and international context is truly the task of the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Major enduring research effort is required to provide the knowledge base for substantive change. The following quote from Maurice Strong, encapsulates this point very well.

***“Most of the changes we must make are in our economic life. The system of taxes, subsidies, regulations and policies through which governments motivate the behaviour of individuals and corporations continues to incent unsustainable behaviours.”***  
(US Senate Environment Treaty Implementation Review, July 24 2002)

A second area requiring major sustained effort is sustainability education – or as I prefer to think of it – learning to be sustainable. Currently the biggest force shaping our perceptions of our needs and wants is consumer advertising. The sums invested are enormous; the impact on our core values and beliefs significant. If individuals, communities etc are to fully action the strategies goals, there will need to be progressively major investment in “sustainability learnings” and that can increasingly temper the influence of consumer advertising **while** the way goods and services to society evolve into sustainable models.

To conclude, the strategy is a great effort. If similar inspiration and effort on its implementation can be maintained by Western Australia over the next decade, WA will be a truly great place to live, be an endangered species and do business.

Kind Regards

Yours sincerely

**Dr J Morgan Williams**  
**Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment**