

Twenty Years of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment: PCE20

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Outgoing Commissioner Dr Morgan Williams applauds incoming Commissioner Dr Jan Wright PCE20 Forum 2007, Wellington, New Zealand. Wikimedia Commons.

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Summary

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of New Zealand's Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, a forum was held in Wellington on 1-2 March 2007. The forum featured a world-class line-up of international guest panellists, all of whom are experts on aspects of environmental sustainability. A high-profile group of New Zealanders also took part. The McGuinness Institute (then Sustainable Future) was present, and this think piece summarises the recommendations that were made.

The international guest panellists acknowledged that New Zealand's 'clean, green' image is intact internationally, however they were surprised at the lack of documentation to support this reputation. They commented that New Zealand has a relatively low level of regulation, and that the lack of reports on performance measures would not be acceptable internationally. They also noted that, economically, the lack of reporting could have negative effects in a marketplace where consumers are demanding more transparency and traceability of information about the products they purchase. The sheer length of the flights the speakers had to undertake to get here made them very aware of New Zealand's distance from the rest of the world, highlighting that food miles will become an issue that this country will have to tackle. Several speakers also noted the lack of infrastructure for bicycles, such as access, safety, parking and storage. Indeed, they commented that in some respects New Zealand resembles a third world country in terms of issues such as car exhaust fumes and the poor quality of its public transport.

According to both local and international panellists, central government's role in promoting sustainability is to improve accountability and reporting practices. They gave several examples of government entities which could be given mandates to take the lead in national sustainability policy, including Treasury, a new 'Ministry for Sustainability', the Ministry for the Environment and the PCE (by expanding it into a 'Parliamentary Commissioner for Sustainable Development'). Crown Research Institutes could also adopt and report on sustainable development and public engagement practices.

Proposals for national sustainability policies included the establishment of innovative and effective methods of accounting for natural and public capital along the lines of GPI measures and environmental/social deficit indices, taxation reforms, better procurement practices, and amendments to the Resource Management Act requiring the production of relevant and cost-effective National Environmental Standards. The adoption of an Environmental Bill of Rights, similar to Ontario's, under the auspices of a New Zealand Humanitarian Bill of Rights was also proposed.

At the regional level panellists noted that transport, water and air quality strategies could be better linked to national strategies, and more formal mandates for regional councils with regard to land use, climate change, energy and transport strategies could also be developed. The quality of engagement between central, regional and local government could be improved, and some observed a disconnect between the public and their regional councillors.

Better transparency regarding the effectiveness of the links between local, regional and central government was also mentioned as a means of increasing the quality of strategies at all government levels.

A number of interesting recommendations were made with regard to agricultural and horticultural industries, education and the business sector. These recommendations are listed below.

Other recommendations made by the panellists included increasing the quality of research on perceptions of national identity and changing values, improving effective local solutions to influenza, the dangers of tsunami and earthquakes in highly populated areas, increasing the public's self-efficacy and capacity to act, as well as supporting mechanisms to increase the quality of sustainability leadership in New Zealand, especially among young people. The take-home message from the PCE20 Forum was that sustainability cannot be adequately addressed by leadership from only one key player. Businesses, citizens, government, consumers, NGOs, and the different cultures of New Zealand all need to show leadership over the coming decades.

The recommendations of the panellists are listed in full on the following page.

Observations from International Guest Panellists (from Australia, Ontario, Germany and the UK)

1. New Zealand has a low level of regulation in comparison with other countries.
2. The lack of reporting (using figures) to measure performance was indeed surprising and would not be acceptable internationally.
3. New Zealand does have a clean, green image internationally, but as a result of this conference, there is obviously a lack of documentation/reports to support this reputation.
4. The high level of pollution/fumes from car exhausts was very surprising and internationally would be considered third world.
5. New Zealand has a very poor public transport system, whereas this is a priority in many cities abroad.
6. The lack of bicycle access/safety/parking/storage was noticeable.
7. Transparency and traceability is increasingly important in international markets, especially because consumers are requiring corporations to be more environmentally and socially sustainable.
8. The sheer distance of the speakers' flights to New Zealand made them very aware of how far New Zealand is from Europe, and the implications for this for our tourism and export sectors.
9. Food miles will be an issue New Zealand will need to discuss and address in the future.
10. We are facing a 'sustainability emergency'.

Central government

New Zealand needs to use institutional structures more effectively in order to improve accountability and reporting practices on sustainability issues. Some of the examples raised included:

11. Treasury could be given a sustainability mandate to focus on delivering sustainable development.
12. Create a separate Ministry for Sustainability.
13. The Ministry for the Environment (MfE) is given responsibility for Sustainable Development initiatives.
14. Responsibilities to deliver sustainability are integrated/interlinked across all Ministries and Departments in a more effective and transparent manner.
15. Change the PCE to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Sustainable Development (PCSD).
16. The PCE responsibilities are increased to produce the national state of the environment report (rather than the Ministry for the Environment) to ensure the resulting report is independent of those responsible for making progress (e.g. an independent review of progress).
17. Make Crown Research Institutes (CRI) adopt and report on sustainable development and public engagement practices. For example, CRIs should listen to what is happening amongst the public as well as what the government commissions them to do; to ensure CRIs get a better feel for what the public wants and needs from their products and services. For example an understanding of their footprint.
18. Use the mechanism under the RMA to provide relevant and cost-effective National Environmental Standards (NES). For example, quality water and soil standards.
19. Use innovative and effective methods for accounting for natural and public capital.
20. Support and promote better procurement practices (as currently under consideration).
21. Consider developing 'public service agreements on sustainability' (as in the UK) on the proviso that if these agreements are not met, funding is reduced.
22. Consider producing a NZ humanitarian Bill of Rights (as currently in operation in Ontario). By doing this, an Environmental Bill of Rights be adopted as a mechanism that allows public participation and involvement in sustainability and environmental issues.

23. Use measures to report national progress through positives such as the GPI, and not through GDP and other measures that take into account negative expenditure.
24. Consider the adoption of environmental and social deficit indices, in the same way we have economic measures.
25. The Govt3 initiative should be expanded and extended to local and regional governments, state-owned enterprises, and Crown Research Institutes.
26. MfE should regularly produce State of the Environment reports (we were advised this was happening in 2007, ten years after the first one).
27. Review the taxation system in order to identify barriers (disincentives) and opportunities (incentives) to adopt sustainable practice in New Zealand.

Regional government

28. Transport, water and air quality strategies must be linked to national strategies.
29. Electric buses must be seen to be a serious public transport alternative.
30. Initiatives must be put in place to close the significant gap between the public and the regional councillors. Currently, effective councillors do not appear to be aware of their roles and responsibilities. In order for the current structure to deliver quality governance, we must have effective engagement on issues and transparency over responsibilities and accountability.
31. Consider implementing more formal mandates for regional councils i.e. with regard to their role in land use, climate change, energy and transport strategies and direction.
32. Improve the quality of engagement between local, regional and central government.
33. Report on the number of submissions received from/ to central government (by department) in order to ensure outputs and outcomes are optimal. Currently there is no reporting on the number of submissions received, summaries prepared and made public, and the overall quality of consultation.

Local government

34. All Councils should be required to have the capacity to recycle (1-7) all plastics.
35. There is a need for a greater link between central and local government. Transparency over what the link is and how effectively it is being used would be helpful in directing quality input into both national and local strategies.

Agricultural and horticultural industries

36. Develop a common language, for example, the distinction between full product costing and pricing etc. People appear to deal with the idea of risk management rather than sustainability or climate change terminology – does this leave space for reframing how we talk about these issues?
37. Develop tools to provide information that can be certified as true and correct; e.g. what does 'food miles' mean and how can it be calculated?
38. Develop mechanisms to applaud actions based on today's information rather than justifying today's negative actions based on past practices (which were based on past information). For example, 'because this is the way my father did it, this is the way it should be today'. Many farmers are role models for current and future generations of farmers.
39. Develop a culture that is based on what is good for New Zealand now and in the future.
40. Get close to the market and understand the risks and opportunities. For example, the space in which New Zealand has to capitalise and brand itself as sustainable – truly clean and green – is fast closing. The agriculture industry needs to be proactive – being reactive is no longer enough.

41. Develop realistic, relevant and cost-effective processes and innovative solutions around Kyoto; e.g. 'How do we tackle commercial drivers and perverse incentives set up by rules around Kyoto? What process/capability do we have in place to manage the unprecedented levels of deforestation (of exotic plantations) and conversion of land to dairy farming? What about the process for developing effective practices post-2012?'
42. Consider whether a price incentive could be attached to land use options.
43. New Zealanders (including urban dwellers) consider they have rights over the environment (including the rural environment, animal welfare, biodiversity, culture, access etc) whereas farmers may consider that because they own the land they have 100% control over it ('my home, my castle, my kingdom'). As with business, stakeholders are arguing for more rights – i.e. that they have been given a licence to occupy and that licence is provided by stakeholders – via democracy. We need to discuss how we think about property rights, such as emphasising that a property right is a social contract not a physical entity, and that with a right also comes a property responsibility.

Education

44. Engage more effectively with what under-14 yrs need. Removing choice for children in their learning inhibits their ability to think collectively and imaginatively.
45. Teach New Zealand history across all age groups, and improve teaching around the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Retail and business sector

46. Ensure there are pathways for these groups to engage in the sustainability debate/movement.
47. Build effective solutions to ensure the market is better informed about the real cost of products and services. New Zealand business is already operating and making decisions based on the carbon tax, but needs additional government signals to make secure investment decisions.
48. Have one central reporting register added onto the Companies Office Register, allowing all entities to add voluntary annual reports and health and safety records etc. in one central place for the public. It was noted that a great deal of information required by government on an entity is made public in a wide range of central agencies and that this should be integrated on the web for users and the public – in one easily accessed website.

Other

49. Increase the quality of research into 'how changes in land use may affect perceptions of national identity'. For example, how is the alteration of landscapes (e.g. after the 2004 lower North Island floods), as visual, felt impacts, affecting public perceptions of environmental change and sustainability?
50. How are values changing?
51. Can we improve effective local solutions to the problem of influenza, tsunami-alarm warnings on flat, highly populated areas, earthquakes etc.
52. How do we increase people's self-efficacy and capacity to act?
53. Support mechanisms to increase the quality of 'sustainability' leadership in New Zealand. There should be a lot more support to encourage leadership amongst young people, with the creation of programmes that support this, such as the UK's Forum for the Future.
54. We cannot address sustainability if we focus on the leadership of one key player. All sectors need to be involved, and leadership needs to come from business, citizens, government, consumers, NGOs and people from the different cultures of New Zealand.

For complete references and to find out more, visit our website: www.mcguinnessinstitute.org.



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