

This article was written by Jonathan Porritt for the Holyrood magazine, published the week of the 28th February 2005.

Sustainable Scotland

One of my main tasks as Chairman of the Sustainable Development Commission is to emphasise both the intellectual rigour and the convening power of sustainable development. It's also my job to go on pointing out to those in politics still flailing around to find a genuinely "big idea" to match the massive challenges of the 21st Century that it's already right there under their noses - and it's called sustainable development.

We're all pretty familiar with those challenges. Some of them are environmental - climate change, over fishing, water shortages, deforestation and so on. Some are social - security issues, poverty, growing wealth disparities and so on. And some are economic.

But what is more important than any one of those challenges in its own right is the degree to which it impacts on all the others. It's the combinations that are becoming so problematic. It's for that reason that the main principle used by the Sustainable Development Commission is "putting sustainable development at the centre":

With that in mind, I sometimes despair when I hear of politicians talking about "joined-up politics". Joined-up politics really isn't a question of improved cross-departmental cooperation in policy-making, but of a completely different way of looking at what we now have to do to build a secure, equitable and sustainable future for human kind. Sustainable development provides both the conceptual framework and the operational toolkit to achieve precisely that.

At a UK level, a new sustainable development strategy will be launched soon, along with a UK Framework document. The goals, principles and priorities have been agreed by the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Administration in Northern Ireland and the UK Government.

In Scotland, a partnership approach is being used to develop a Scottish Strategy for Sustainable Development. The Scottish Executive is looking for 'buy in' not just across it's own departments but with the Sustainable Development Commission and with the external members of the Cabinet Sub Committee on Sustainable Development. Consensus is much better than imposition!

In the Commission, we understand that the Scottish Strategy will be produced later this year. Not another formal consultation for civic Scotland to pore over; instead, the agenda is to focus on what needs to happen in Scotland to deliver a sustainable future and the actions by all, not just government, that are needed to make this happen.

Our hope is for an action-focused Scottish document on what can be achieved, when and how. Some of the most innovative thinking and practice in this area are already emerging in Scotland and Wales. Indeed, at SDC's first conference in Scotland on 7 March we will be highlighting this as a theme.

In Scotland, the social housing sector has been pioneering. Examples like Fyne Homes' work on biomass heating of homes in Lochgilphead not only provides effective heating from a locally supplied renewable energy source but also creates jobs. In Perth, Fairfield Housing Co-operative worked with the local community to turn around a housing scheme from an area blighted by poor housing, a high crime rate and low life expectancy to a haven of sustainable buildings with a waiting list to get in and zero crime rate.

Excellent work can be done, but only if that kind of sustainable approach can be mainstreamed in from the start. The Scottish Executive has some major hurdles to overcome to achieve this, as acknowledged by the First Minister: 'Bringing about real change and truly developing Scotland in a more sustainable way means building sustainable development in everything that we do'.

And that means the First Minister has some fundamental challenges to meet this aim on a number of fronts:

- The Executive presses all the right buttons in encouraging public transport, but then uses its resources to develop major road building projects in Glasgow and Aberdeen.
- There are massive challenges to ensure that Scotland's renewables target is met, particularly whilst wind power remains so controversial.
- There is a vital need to modernise the planning system in Scotland, in such a way as to instil greater fairness and transparency.
- As long as the Executive continues to state that value for money should be 'at the heart' of public procurement, then truly sustainable procurement is incredibly difficult to achieve whilst so many environmental costs are still not internalised.
- There are enormous challenges of this kind throughout the "modernisation" process.

Scotland has an important role to play in working towards a sustainable future for the planet. The Commission, as the 'critical friend' of government, will be pushing for the Scottish Executive to rise creatively and purposefully to that challenge.