1 The politics of sustainable development

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Sustainable development is a political fudge: a convenient form of words, promoted, though not invented, by the Brundtland Commission, which is sufficiently vague to allow conflicting parties, factions and interests to adhere to it without losing credibility. It is an expression of political correctness which seeks to bridge the unbridgeable divide between the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to politics.

Beneath the rhetoric of the political platform, the reality is that the concept of sustainable development as presently used is inherently contradictory and begs a number of important questions. There are two basic approaches: the anthropocentric, sometimes referred to as the environmental, and the biocentric, sometimes referred to as the ecological or Gaian. The former approach, adopted by the traditional political parties, by business and trade union interests, and by governments and bureaucracies generally – the European Union among them – presupposes no great changes in the political and economic process or the relationship between humankind and nature. In contrast, the biocentric approach, adopted by ecological interest groups and the majority of Green parties, is predicated upon a fundamental change in the relationship between humankind and nature, with consequential social, political and economic implications.

This Chapter will address the political implications of the differing approaches to sustainable development. It will consider the challenges faced by governments at all levels – international, national and local – within a planetary system of finite resources. It will argue that for the concept to have any real meaning, other than as a consensual phrase of political agreement, it needs to be radically redefined along purely ecological lines. If that is not possible it should be totally abandoned.
ANTHROPOCENTRICITY, BIOCENTRICITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The rise of industrial society in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stimulated the emergence of anthropocentric rather than biocentric ways of thinking (Richardson 1994: 4). By the mid-twentieth century the industrial worldview, based on the conquest of nature, materialism and consumption, had achieved almost universal acceptance. In the industrialized world, consumers and politicians look to ever-increasing material standards of living; in the less-developed countries (LDC's) politicians seek to emulate the achievements of the established industrialized states. The achievement of economic growth, measured quantitatively through gross national product (GNP) or through GNP per capita, has become the touchstone of success.

The essence of the anthropocentric approach to the natural world is that humankind is above nature and has the right – divine or otherwise – to subjugate it. Often called domination theory (Richardson 1994: 4), this approach has two main aspects – religious and secular. Of the major religious traditions, the Christian is by far the most anthropocentric (White 1967: 1205), calling on humankind to impose its will on the natural world, to subdue it (Genesis: 26, 28). This tradition, through industrialism, has become allied and entwined with the secular: the scientific-rationalist concept, grounded in the ideas of Bacon, Newton and Descartes, explanations of life are reduced to the material. Anything that cannot be proved scientifically is deemed not to exist; anything that cannot be measured does not matter. It is this impersonal, rationalizing outlook, with its emphasis on purely economic and scientific values in measuring human progress, which is integral to the concepts of capitalism, communism, liberalism, socialism and conservation – and to the political parties which stem from them. The pursuit of wealth and exploitation of the planet may take place on an individualist basis (conservatism), on a collectivist basis (socialism and communism) or on a mixed basis (liberalism and social democracy); but in practice the only differences between the anthropocentric political parties are their methods of organizing the pursuit of wealth and material expansion, dependent as they are on the exploitation of the Earth's resources.

The biocentric approach to the human condition is radically different. It is anti-materialist in that it eschews the pursuit of wealth as a goal in itself and seeks to enhance the non-material (some would say spiritual) dimension of the human experience. There is emphasis on the quality of life as distinct from the quantity of material possessions, on feelings and values, on the inner rather than the outer self. Partly this is a question of recognizing the wholeness of the self (material and non-material) as well as the wholeness of the planet. But more fundamentally, from the point of view of the present Chapter, it is a question of recognizing that the pursuit of wealth through industrial expansion and economic growth is ultimately incompatible with the Earth’s finite resource base. Central to this approach is the view that the Earth's resources should be used as capital rather than as income, otherwise humankind is merely consuming what rightly belongs to future generations (Schumacher 1974: 12–14, 16). The concept is that of Right Livelihood. Consumption should be based on human need rather than human greed.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the climax of what came to be known as the Great Doom debate, between the anthropocentric establishment and its emergent biocentric critics. Major attacks on the industrial worldview came from E. J. Mishan with The Costs of Economic Growth (1967), the Club of Rome’s The Limits to Growth (Meadows et al. 1972), the Ecologist’s Blueprint for Survival (1972) and E. F. Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful (1974). The first national Green party in Europe, with a specifically biocentric basis, was founded in 1973 – the UK Green Party – then known simply as ‘People’. By the early 1980s Green parties had been established in most western European states, and in West Germany Die Grünen entered the
Bundestag in March 1983. In subsequent years, Greens have entered national and local assemblies throughout Europe and pose not only an intellectual threat to the prevailing anthropocentrism of the traditional political parties, but a political threat as well.²

Anthropocentrism in its various guises remains the dominant force within national and international society. But in recent years, with the development of the ecological critique of the industrial worldview and the appearance of Green parties in national assemblies, there has been an attempt on the part of anthropocentric thinkers and practitioners to dilute the impact of their biocentric critics. For example, a watered-down version of domination theory has gained currency. As regards the religious aspect, this has found expression in the concept of stewardship, whereby the human race is exulted to ‘take all possible action to ensure man’s responsible stewardship over nature’ (Echlin 1988: 5). This is seen by some as a middle way between the environmental destruction associated with the industrial worldview, and ecological determinism (O’Riordan 1976: 204), but in reality the concept of stewardship is as human-centred as the crueler forms of anthropocentric theory. Humankind is still in charge of the natural world. Similarly, as regards the scientific-rationalist aspect of domination theory, watered-down anthropocentrism can be seen in the concept of sustainable development, which in practical terms has come to mean that a modicum of attention is paid to environmental – as distinct from ecological – concerns, within the overall context of the continued plundering of the Earth’s resources (Orton 1994: 13).

The term ‘sustainable development’ is hardly a new one. The Canadian government began to use the term, intermittently and anthropocentrically, in the early 1980s. However, it was the publication of the Brundtland Report, Our Common Future, in 1987 which popularized and politicized the term. The report itself, the product of three years’ work by the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development, was a series of compromises between the opposing views of twenty-three commissioners from twenty-one different states from around the globe. Typical of the compromises was that on the definition of sustainable development: ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED 1987: 8). It was a ‘catch-all’ definition which left all the commissioners happy: a good political fudge – and an excellent political slogan – but on deeper analysis a vague, contradictory, even meaningless concept.

The key to understanding the Brundtland approach to the natural world is that it frames anthropocentric programmes and the industrial worldview in the language of biocentricity. At the level of rhetoric, Brundtland unites the supporters of treadmill production such as Simon and Kahn (1984) with those who would mitigate its effects on the environment, through either a market-reliant environmental policy (Pearce et al. 1989) or an environmentally regulated market (Jacobs 1991). Similarly, in terms of a Ladder of Sustainable Development (see the Introduction) the Brundtland phraseology unites the advocates of exponential growth with the exponents of ‘weak sustainable development’ and ‘strong sustainable development’. In essence, the supporters of Brundtland do not seek to question the concept of quantitative growth measured in traditional terms, although adherents of strong sustainable development may wish to see it redirected in part along qualitative lines. In contrast, the advocates of a biocentric approach question the very concept of quantitative growth.

Given their inherent anthropocentricity and support of the industrial worldview, it is hardly surprising that the Brundtland principles have been endorsed, indeed welcomed, by governments at all levels. They are the basis of the European Union’s Fifth Environmental Action Programme. They are written into the Maastricht Treaty, which aspires to ‘sustainable and non-inflationary growth respecting the environment’. They are reflected in the agreements reached at the Earth Summit in Rio in June 1992: the Rio Declaration; the Convention on Biodiversity; the Statement of Forest Principles; the Framework Convention on Climate Change; and Agenda 21. Principle 12 of the Rio Declaration, for example, lays down that ‘States should co-operate to promote a supportive and open international system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries’. This approach is further reflected in the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, established after Rio as a promotional vehicle to offset the threat of the political ecology movement to national governments and global multinational business (Orton 1994: 14). The UK Government’s report to the UN Commission on Local Agenda 21 stated specifically that ‘Sustainable development is not incompatible with economic growth’ (UKLGMG 1993: 2).

The problem with the Brundtland Commission was that it tried to unite the ununitable – the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to the natural world – by means of an agreed form of words. It was an act of political consensus which sought to bring together not only governments (both Left and Right), but the business community, the scientific establishment, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and even environmentalists. In this it has achieved considerable success. It is almost universally subscribed to. It gives hope to developed states, in
particular their scientific and business communities, that economic expansion can be achieved without adversely affecting the environment. It gives hope to LDCs and underdeveloped regions that their development needs will be met. It has given environmentalists credibility. In reality, however, by the very fact that it based its findings on the need for political consensus, the Brundtland Commission begged the very questions that it was established to analyse. What, in fact, constitutes development? What is the relationship, if any, between development and growth? How can needs be identified? How should future needs be compared with present needs? What are needs as distinct from desires? Which future generations should be taken into account in formulating policy? The next generation? The next but one? Or, given the problem of nuclear waste, the next but twenty-one?

THE TERMINOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICS

For the concept of sustainable development to have any utility – except as a political slogan – it needs to be radically redefined. Given its inherent contradictions, there is a good case for abandoning it altogether. However, its assimilation into the political vocabulary as an icon of political correctness makes redefinition, at this stage, a justifiable and potentially productive exercise. Essentially, this means coming to terms with three main issues: development, needs and sustainability.

The anthropocentric view of development is that it is synonymous with growth, growth which follows the Western development paradigm based on international free trade, the maximization of output and the expansion of individual economies, local and national, measured in terms of GNP. In practice, it is this development paradigm which has been adopted by ruling elites on a worldwide basis. Terminologically, it has much to be said for it. Indeed, it is backed by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Development, according to dictionary definition, has four main meanings: a gradual unfolding, in the sense of a fuller working out of details; evolution, in the sense of the production of a new form or matter; growth of what is in the germ; and growth from within. In other words, all four definitions entails some kind of expansion or growth, and in the first three definitions this is primarily physical. Only the fourth definition – inner growth – allows for purely non-physical growth.

The biocentric approach to development is opposed to the anthropocentric in that it concentrates on the fourth definition of growth – inner growth – measuring well-being in terms other than that of annual consumption. The biocentric premise is that since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, whether individual or collective, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption (Schumacher 1974: 47–48). This, of course, poses the question of what should be indicators of human well-being. The problem here is that it is difficult to formulate indicators which relate to feelings and values and the non-material world. Birth and death rates, adult literacy levels and life expectation have all been put forward, but they are deficient in that objective factors cannot adequately measure subjective values.

What, then, constitutes development? In theory, there is no one answer, or the answer is ambiguous. But in practice, in the parlance and actions of the political world, the answer is that development is equated with growth, in its material sense. Indeed, the interconnection between development and growth has been enshrined in documentary form, as for example in the Maastricht Treaty and Rio Declaration. Further, it has taken root in the acceptance of the growth-oriented Western development paradigm across the globe. Nevertheless, in the final analysis the equation of growth with development is unrealistic, since exponential economic growth is a physical impossibility given the finite limits of the planet. The consequence, therefore, is that those who wish to define development in terms of non-material, non-physical growth, or in terms of social and cultural growth as well as economic and technological growth, are left with a conundrum. Should they continue to use a term – development – which has effectively been hijacked by the anthropocentric proponents of the industrial worldview, or should they seek a new or refined term which encapsulates their own ideas and feelings?

The question of needs is in many ways similar to that of development, given that there is a material and a non-material element to both. The anthropocentric approach is concerned solely with the material side. Needs are identified and quantified in economic terms, on the grounds that the accretion of wealth, assessed through GNP or GNP per capita, makes it possible to meet the material needs of all. This is the basis of the ‘Brundtland consensus’, which identifies the problem as ‘meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity for a better life’ (WCED 1987: 44). Yet there is no distinction between the perceived needs of people in the industrialized North, with their often extremely high standards of living, and those of the industrializing South, where standards of living are in most cases extremely low.

It is a basis of the Western development paradigm that needs are *unmet and unfulfilled*, as this gives rise to aspirations for greater material growth. Unhappiness and discontentment are deliberately fostered,
in the sense of people and governments wanting more than is obtainable at any one moment (Sadie 1960: 302). At the individual level, the ‘have-nots’ of the industrialized world aspire to the standards of living and material possessions of those that ‘have’. Similarly, at governmental level the ‘have-not’ states of the industrializing world aspire to the standards of living and material possessions of the ‘have’ states. The suffering and dislocation that may be caused to the ecosystem or its human subsystems in the process of attempting to meet these aspirations may be objectionable, but is the price to be paid for economic ‘progress’.

Thus the problem with the anthropocentric approach to needs, enshrined as it is in the Brundtland consensus, is not only that it fails to give due weight to non-material needs, but also that it fails to distinguish between needs and wants, indeed deliberately encourages wants. This is especially important when comparing the putative needs of the industrialized North with those of the ‘industrializing’ South. A ‘need’ in the former is likely to be considered a luxury in the latter. This is equally true within the EU context when comparing, for example, a hyper-developed region of the Netherlands with an economically underdeveloped region in Greece or Portugal or a decaying inner-city urban area such as Moss Side in Manchester. In all cases, however, the fundamental criterion from the anthropocentric standpoint is not the existence of need but the aspiration for ‘more’.

The biocentric approach to need is fundamentally different, since it is predicated upon a baseline of physical and material needs common to both the industrialized and industrializing world. The exact nature of these basic physical needs might be debatable, but certainly they would cover the right to sufficient food, clean water and adequate clothing and shelter. Anything above the agreed baseline would be termed a want or luxury, as, for example, the word processor on which this manuscript is written. But the biocentric approach is not limited to purely physical or material needs; it also encapsulates the fulfilment by human beings of non-material or spiritual needs, together with respect for the needs of non-human life on the planet and, indeed, the Earth itself, because of their intrinsic value independent of human life (Naess 1984: 266).

Thus, as with development, there is a basic incompatibility between the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to needs. Again, dictionary definitions do not help much. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives five main definitions: violence, constraint or compulsion, exercised by or upon persons; necessity arising from the facts; an imperative demand for the presence or possession of something; a condition placing one in difficulty or distress; and a condition marked by the lack or want of some necessary thing. The first three might be taken to support the anthropocentric approach, the fourth the biocentric, while the fifth could be taken as supporting either, given its obfuscation of needs and wants. In practice, however, what is important in relation to sustainable development is the way that needs are assessed in terms of economic and social policy; and in this respect it is clear that the anthropocentric definition, the Brundtland consensus, is paramount. The measurement of need by governments across the globe is based not on the biocentric concept of sufficiency, with an agreed common baseline, but on the aspiration for ‘more’, whatever the existing base. As a consequence, therefore, those who wish to define need in biocentric terms are left with a similar conundrum to those who wish to redefine development along biocentric lines. Should they continue to use a term – in this case ‘need’ – which has effectively been hijacked by the anthropocentric proponents of the industrial worldview? Or should they seek a new or refined term which encapsulates their own ideas and feelings?

If a basic contradiction exists between the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to development and needs, there is an even greater contradiction in their approach to sustainability. The implicit assumption of the traditional anthropocentric approach – and the explicit assumption of the business community and the greater part of the scientific establishment – is that, in practice, the Earth’s resources are infinite and that the question of sustainability does not therefore arise. New reserves of resources, or alternative materials, will be found to replace any that are exhausted. Equally, the traditional anthropocentric approach evades the question of future generations, since new or replacement resources will always be found if any individual resources are exhausted.

The biocentric approach to sustainability is based on the fact that the Earth has finite limits, and that consumption, based on economic growth, cannot go on for ever. Otherwise, sooner or later, the Earth will reach the limits of its carrying capacity in relation to its human subsystem. It is not a question of ‘if’; it is a question of ‘when’. In this respect, three limits in particular must be borne in mind: those imposed by non-renewable resources; those imposed by renewable resources; and those imposed by environmental decay through pollution. Industrial civilization will break down once the relevant limit has been reached. This might occur because key non-renewable resources have become exhausted or it has become uneconomical to exploit them further. It might occur because the renewable resource system has been
overexploited – for example the soil will be unable to feed the growing world population. Or it might occur because the planet’s ecological system is unable to filter out the pollutants that humankind has loaded on to it. In this respect, it is irrelevant which limit is reached first. The end result will be the same: ecological (including human) disaster. The planet will not be inhabitable for future generations.

The biocentric critique of industrial society in the late 1960s and early 1970s had a profound effect on political leaders, more especially since it was difficult to refute that on a finite planet with finite resources there must be a point at which those resources will become exhausted, with the inevitable impact on future generations. The debate on this point could be seen in the workings of the Brundtland Commission, which was obliged to accept, as a philosophical principle, the concept of ecological limits. What it did not accept, however, was the conclusion that industrial society, based on economic growth, would necessarily reach these limits and inevitably decline. For, to accept this conclusion would mean adopting policies which would seriously disrupt the existing social, political and economic status quo, indeed require revolutionary change. Instead, it produced a modicum of ideas which could be accommodated within the existing anthropocentric paradigm, such as environmental costing, resource conservation and the quality (as distinct from quantity) of growth.

In the event the Brundtland Commission produced a formula – sustainable development – which by the manipulation of terminology endeavoured to obscure the contradiction between the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to sustainability. Beneath the rhetoric, however, as with development and needs, the Brundtland concept of sustainability can be seen to be totally anthropocentric in character. Our Common Future not only emphasized that economic growth was still an objective of human society, but also advocated a five- or even tenfold increase in world manufacturing output. It accepted the Western development paradigm and the profligate Western lifestyle as a model for the industrializing world. Ecological sustainability was not seen as primary in the policy-making process, but rather as only one of a number of factors. In essence, the industrial worldview was accepted, albeit in the language – or at least some of the language – of biocentricity.

In practice, therefore, as with development and needs, those who wish to define sustainability along ecological lines are left with a conundrum. Should they continue to use the term sustainability when, to all intents and purposes it has been hijacked by the anthropocentric proponents of the industrial worldview? Or should they seek a new or refined term which encapsulates their own interpretation? Before giving a final answer, it is necessary to consider the political implications of the anthropocentric and biocentric interpretations.

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TERMINOLOGY

The importance of the current ‘Brundtland consensus’ on terminology lies not in what it has accomplished – which is very little – but in what it symbolizes. It connotes a grudging acceptance by anthropocentric politicians and bureaucrats that the biocentric critique is real, powerful, difficult to answer in terms of morality and ethics, and, at least as regards sustainability, impossible to answer in terms of science and logic. But putative acceptance from a philosophical standpoint is different from practical acceptance from a policy standpoint. It is easy for politicians to accept the general principle that the Earth’s natural resources should be conserved and, where possible, replenished. It is not too difficult for them to accept – as a philosophical principle – that on a finite planet with finite resources there must be a point at which those resources will become exhausted. But a rhetorical commitment will not produce the changes required to ensure survival in the longer term. Only political action and commitment will do so.

Here lies the problem. Political action will be taken only if it is clear that inaction will prove more costly (Blowers 1992: 3). States will only take action to prevent or rectify environmental damage if it is in their interests to do so (Grove 1990: 13). Besides, there is the question at both state and individual level of reconciling concern for the environment and ecological damage with aspirations for a better standard of living. In this latter respect, it is pertinent – in the words of the Brundtland Commission – to ask whose environment and whose development is to be sustained. That of Gaia? Of a peasant in the Sahel? An Amazonian Indian? The executives of multinational corporations? Or even international academics?

The potential for conflict over sustainable development at political level is clear (Grayson and Hobson 1994: 2). Not only are there traditional differences to reconcile on the Left–Right spectrum, from an anthropocentric standpoint there are new and emerging differences between the advocates of treadmill production and the supporters of weak and strong sustainable development (see the Introduction). It was these differences which caused the issue to be fudged by Brundtland and which explain why it has continued to be fudged by governments at all levels in subsequent years. To illustrate reality, I will take examples of the anthropocentric paradigm of sustainable
development at three levels - global, European and local. I will then compare them with the biocentric paradigm.

At global level, the anthropocentric paradigm is best illustrated by the Earth Summit held at Rio in 1992 under the auspices of the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development (UNCED). On the surface Rio was a considerable success, uniting North and South through the concepts of free-market environmentalism and growth based on the position and policies advocated by the major multinational corporations (MNCs) and the Business Council for Sustainable Development. But in ecological or biocentric terms Rio was a failure, doing nothing to reverse the historic process whereby trade-led growth has led to ecological degradation through the overexploitation of natural resources. Thus there was a convention on biodiversity, but none on free trade; a convention on forests, but none on logging; a convention on climate, but none on cars; an Action Plan (Agenda 21) which had clauses on enabling the poor to achieve sustainable livelihoods, but none on enabling the rich to do so (Ecologist 1992: 122). In other words, the reality of UNCED was that it was concerned with defending the power, interests and living standards of the ‘haves’ of the industrialized North at the expense not only of the ‘have-nots’ of the industrializing South but also of Gaia.

At the European level, the situation is somewhat similar. On the surface, the European Union has accomplished a great deal in the area of environmental protection. By 1990 it had introduced 160 directives for environmental protection and improvement, covering questions and problems such as water quality (drinking and bathing), food, air quality, noise pollution, toxic waste and vehicle emissions. And subsequently, the Community has become even more proactive in relation to environmental questions, notably in its Fifth Environmental Action Programme of March 1992. This programme not only accepts the concept of sustainable development, albeit from an anthropocentric standpoint, but identifies five main areas where action is specifically to be promoted - agriculture, energy, industry, tourism and transport. Further, since 1993 the European Commission has sought to incorporate environmental considerations into policy-making in general, for example through the process of environmental impact assessment, and to create a co-ordination unit within Directorate-General XI (Environment).

Beneath the surface, however, the measures implemented - or about to be implemented - by the EU are little more than cosmetic. There are no effective means of policing the EU’s directives, and by 1994 not a single one of the 160 environmental directives already referred to had been implemented by all member-states (Green Party 1994: 3). Moreover, environmental questions are low on the EU agenda. For example, environment and climate change constitute only one of fifteen priority areas in the Commission’s Research and Development Programme, with only 9 per cent of the Fourth Framework budget devoted to environmental projects (Grayson and Hobson 1994: 7). In ecological terms, as with the Rio Summit, the EU programmes have been a failure. A telling indictment is the EU transport programme, one of the Fifth Environmental Action Programme’s priority areas. The chief feature of the EU transport programme is not the commitment to public transport, but the expenditure of 120 billion ECU (£93 billion) on the construction of over 50,000 km of new roads, including 12,000 km of new motorways: the so-called Trans-European Road Network (TERN). In comparison, the amount allocated for railways is miniscule.

In reality, at the European level as well as at the global level, environmental policy is made and implemented in terms of the vested interests in government and industry who wish to consolidate their power and follow the path of economic growth. For example, the TERN plan was based on proposals made by the Motorways Working Group - on which there were representatives from the International Roads Federation, the European Round Table of Industrialists, the oil industry and the Association of European Car Manufacturers, but none from environmental pressure groups (Whitelegg 1994: 1). The fact that the consequences of TERN, in terms of the production of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, can be considered to be in direct contravention of the EU’s commitments in the Framework Convention on Climate Change at Rio did not even enter the equation.

At local level, the anthropocentric paradigm is best illustrated through the evolution of Local Agenda 21. In the UK this resulted in the framing of a major report by the UK Local Government Management Board in May 1993. This report went some way towards defining the practical implications of accepting that the world has finite limits. For example, it urged that policy decisions be taken on the precautionary principle, by which there is an assumption against actions whose environmental impact is uncertain, and drew up a list of actions and policies that could be undertaken by both local and central government (UKLGB 1993: 7, 20–31). At the same time, the thrust of the report, like that of Brundtland, was that sustainability and growth are not incompatible and that continuous environmental improvement is possible provided that natural resources are used more efficiently. Moreover, there was an inherent contradiction in the report,
in that it envisaged the poor and disadvantaged having greater access to resources – in other words increasing their consumption of resources – which ran counter to the report’s stated principle of reducing overall consumption levels. Unless, that is, the rich are required to reduce their consumption, a question which is politically difficult and which the report deliberately avoided – just as Brundtland did.

It is to avoid the question of making difficult political choices that governments at all levels have taken the anthropocentric approach to the environment. If consumerism, the pursuit of ever-increasing wealth levels and the profligate use of natural resources engender ecological damage on a worldwide basis, they also constitute the basis of the quality of life of Western civilization. It is difficult to envisage the metaphorical man and woman in the street voluntarily accepting reduced standards of living; and it is even more difficult to envisage traditional politicians advocating such a course; thus the current preoccupation with assimilating the anthropocentric approach into the ecological imperative by adopting Brundtland rhetoric and incorporating environmental costs into neo-classical economics.

For biocentrists, attempts to mitigate the environmental consequences of treadmill production through so-called weak or strong sustainable development are foredoomed to failure, since the anthropocentric approach to the natural world, despite the terminology of sustainability, is still based on the progressive liquidation of the natural capital that we call planet Earth. Ultimately, industrial economics, founded on expanding consumption and the maximization of production, will deplete the very resource base on which industrial society depends. It will be the author of its own destruction. As Bertolt Brecht put it:

And they were sawing off the branches on which they were sitting, and eventually they dropped off and those who watched them shook their heads and kept on sawing.

(Brecht, quoted in Echlin 1993: 4)

The problem is that human economic activity is already exhausting non-renewable resources and expending renewable resources far more quickly than the planet can regenerate them, while producing wastes and pollution beyond the carrying capacity of the Earth. With the continuing population explosion, the economic aspirations of LDCs and underdeveloped regions – in particular the People’s Republic of China – and the even greater aspirations of the industrialized world, the situation can only get worse, not better, unless there is a radical redirection of human effort and understanding.

For biocentrists, the central problem is not the incorporation of the environment into economic policy, but the incorporation of economic policy into sustaining the biosphere. This, however, would require a very different approach to the human condition and lead to a very different kind of society to the current Western model. Essentially, it would entail a steady-state economy which could afford a tolerable standard of living for all humankind while respecting the intrinsic value and life of the non-human world and the natural environment. It would require a change in the nature of production and consumption and the adoption of no-growth or even negative-growth policies: it would require resource conservation rather than resource exploitation; a reduction in population; redistribution of resources between North and South and interregionally; it would require the cessation of activities which would penalize future generations (Blowers 1992: 3). In the final analysis, it might require de-industrialization.

CONCLUSION

So what, then, is the future of sustainable development? The concept as defined by Brundtland is not only a political fudge; it is a sham. It attempts – unsuccessfully – to obscure the basic contradiction between the finiteness of the Earth, with natural self-regulating systems operating within limits, and the expansionary nature of industrial society (Orton 1994: 19). The divide between the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches is unbridgeable, and the attempt by Brundtland to obfuscate the incongruity by promoting a new terminology is, ultimately, foredoomed to failure.

At the same time, it is possible that in future years we may come to see Brundtland in a better light, by considering the concept of sustainable development not as an end in itself but as a tentative first step which took politicians along the road from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. To some extent, for the industrialized North this can be viewed in terms of a Ladder of Sustainable Development (see the Introduction). But the ladder analogy can be taken too far. There is no natural progression from treadmill production to weak sustainable development to strong sustainable development, let alone to the Ideal (biocentric) Model. Indeed, governments can move down the Ladder as well as up. Moreover, despite their differences in policy terms, there is a basic link between the treadmill approach to the natural world and that of both weak and strong sustainable development, in that they all have anthropocentric underpinnings and are all based – to a greater or
lesser extent – on the pursuit of quantitative growth. There is no such link between the anthropocentric and biocentric paradigms.

In practice, therefore, there can be no direct progression from even strong sustainable development to the biocentric ideal. Not only are the philosophical underpinnings entirely different, so too are the policies and objectives they give rise to. In contrast to the capital-intensive ‘high-tech’ future offered by the anthropocentric development paradigm, the biocentric paradigm is associated with Right Livelihood, appropriate technology, labour-intensive, small-scale production, the active promotion of biodiversity, inter- and intra-generational equity and ‘bottom-up’ community control. Overall, indeed, the biocentric approach would involve the wholesale restructuring and reorientation of political, social, legal and institutional structures.

Given the intrinsic differences between the anthropocentric and biocentric development paradigms, there is a need for new terminology to evaluate and understand the biocentric approach. Sustainable development, with its anthropocentric underpinning and inherent contradictions, must go. It has no place within the biocentric paradigm since it has been effectively hijacked by the proponents of anthropocentrism. The question is what to replace it with. One possibility is that put forward by Edward Echlin in the annual Newman Lecture in 1993. It is that of ‘sustainable sufficiency’. As Echlin puts it, it is a question of ‘living lightly within the soil as if the future mattered’ (Echlin 1993: 7); or, to put it another way, of satisfying our vital physical and material needs – together with our non-material or spiritual needs – within the ecosystem: putting in as much as we take out. But to do this, as John Seymour (1989: 1) suggests, we must first accept that we are a part of nature and not above it.

Political scientists are familiar with the now discredited Marxist progression from feudalism through capitalism to socialism. It is possible, however, in the none-too-distant future, that they will be analysing the transition from capitalism to ecologism and from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. As regards development paradigms, they may be analysing the transition from sustainable development to sustainable sufficiency.

NOTES

1 That is not to say that biocentric thinkers and activists, whether religious or secular, did not exist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; rather they represented a minority point of view.

2 It should be noted, however, that many Green parties have anthropocentric elements within them.

3 In this respect, the Brundtland Report and the Rio Summit can be said to be analogous to the Muravieff Circular and the first Hague Peace Conference of 1899, which encapsulated the philosophical acceptance of the concept of disarmament by governments, who meantime strove officiously to avoid its practical implications (Richardson 1989: 29-32).

REFERENCES


2 Sustainable development and the deep ecology movement

Arne Naess

What I have to say falls into two parts: first, I describe the false direction of present developments; second, I explore the role of the deep ecology movement.

In common usage, the terms ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’ are seen as bywords for progress when we talk about communities, societies or states. Groups with different policies try to make them their own. Consequently, the terms are open to a confusing diversity of interpretations. In particular, sustainable development as a goal is often explicitly or implicitly limited to the fairly shortsighted interests of one species, the human species. This is in contrast to the deep ecology movement, which focuses on the long-term defence of life conditions on Earth – ‘full ecological sustainability’. In practice, in the many conflicts between animals and humans concerning territory, the limiting of concern only to humans would go against the long-term interests of both humans and animals.

There is a tendency today, even among politicians – who have no animal voters – to call for respect for all other living beings. But they often complain that only a minority of people feel that way. The question of how far one should go in concern for the richness and diversity of life will always give rise to different views. Supporters of the deep ecology movement go far, but no extreme views are implied. The movement is broad and is realistic when it comes to practical applications.

ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

General sustainable development I take by definition to imply continuity over generations without very severe negative consequences. This implies ecological sustainability as one aspect of general sustainable development. Opinions about what would constitute a very severe consequence, however, will naturally differ. Some would reckon only