

TAKING THE LONG VIEW

OUR FUTURE DEPENDS ON LONGER TERM THINKING TO CREATE MORE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES, A PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE HAS HEARD IN ITS QUEST TO DEVELOP A SUSTAINABILITY CHARTER FOR AUSTRALIA.

STORY: NIC BARNARD



Conservationist and author Stewart Brand tells an illuminating story in his 1994 book *How buildings learn: what happens after they are built*.

It concerns the repair of an old oak-beamed roof in an Oxford college. When the college was built, hundreds of years ago, a forest of oak trees was also planted. By the time the roof finally needed repair, the oak trees would have grown sufficiently tall to produce the timber required for the job.

The builders of the college were taking a 200 to 300-year perspective. Now that's sustainability.


Architect Peter Phillips recalled the story when he addressed the House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee. His point, put with only a little understatement, was that it is not just architects that need to take the long view.

He was also telling MPs something about the lessons history can teach politicians: about the need to think beyond three-year-terms; about the

value of looking to our roots even as we hurtle head-first through the modern world; and beyond that, about the need for a deeper, wider understanding of sustainability.

Mr Phillips, president of the Australian branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, was one of a number of speakers giving this message as the committee considers a sustainability charter for Australia.

Their implied concern is that the committee may have got off on the



“ A MORE CONNECTED SOCIETY, RICH IN VALUES, IS A HEALTHIER SOCIETY, AND SO A MORE SUSTAINABLE ONE. ”

wrong foot. That the climate change debate cannot just be about economics—whether or not we can afford to take action—or even about endangered species or water supplies or transport. It has to be about people. They urge MPs towards a charter that takes a more holistic view of sustainability, and puts health and wellbeing, social equity and cohesive communities at its heart.

The inquiry, launched last year, grew out of the same committee's 2005 report, *Sustainable cities*.

One of that report's key findings was the need for an Australian sustainability charter—a document that would be both aspirational and measurable, with ambitious but reachable targets which could be continually monitored and re-assessed; a living document that the public could relate to and keep up with through regular reports.

The committee called for submissions relating in particular to five areas: the built environment; water; energy; transport; and the nation's ecological footprint.

But as a number of experts have told MPs, what really underpins the drive for sustainability in all these areas is the issue of health. Or as Professor Anthony McMichael of the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University puts it, sustainability is “frankly ... a matter of absolute self-interest for us as a species”.

In a short, but perceptive paper submitted to the inquiry, Professor McMichael makes the human dimension explicit.

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Non-sustainability, he writes, has “huge, and growing, implications for human wellbeing, health and (in some parts of the world already) survival”.

He goes on: “Much of our day-to-day discussion of ‘sustainability’ focuses on achieving a balance between environmental conditions, social conditions and economic productivity. This, misleadingly, is referred to as ‘the triple bottom line’. However, those three entities are actually means; they are not ends. The true objective of our achieving a sustainable way of living is to ensure the continuation of good and equitable experience (both biological and social) for humans.”

He concludes: “Human wellbeing and health ought, then, to be the central criterion of ‘sustainability’.”

Professor Stephen Corbett, director of the Centre for Population Health at Sydney West Area Health Service, takes a similar line: “A sustainable community must also be a healthy community.”

Both contributors use transport to illustrate what they mean. (Indeed, public transport looms large over many submissions to the sustainability debate. Professor Corbett calls it “the key issue both for sustainability and public health”.)

The car is linked, of course, to greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use. But it is also critically linked to health, through air pollution, road traffic injury, and the way it encourages less exercise, leading to health problems such as obesity and diabetes, Professor Corbett says.

(On the latter, he starkly told the committee: “Our services are being

overwhelmed already. The epidemic is with us.”)

Better public transport leads to healthier citizens, who use less energy to get around, who contribute less to greenhouse gas emissions.

Professor McMichael underlines this in his submission, and points a way forward for the committee in developing a charter. Monitoring of health impacts must be part of the measurable benchmarks; one way might be to incorporate health risk assessments, taking into account the full impact on health of decisions. So for transport, it would mean considering not just air pollution and road deaths but obesity and diabetes and, Professor McMichael says, “noise pollution, stress and sleep disturbance, the break-up of neighbourhoods by major roads and the impact of that on social cohesion”.

Social cohesion is an esoteric concept, and a hard one to pin down, but several contributors point to its importance to the debate.

The Disability Council of NSW argues that “...cities become sustainable only when the people who live in them feel included in the ebb and flow of city life and enabled to participate in city living on more or less the same basis as one another”.

For the council, that means re-imagining our cities to allow everybody to play their part, including disabled people who—with an ageing population—are growing in numbers. It is predicted that more than one in five Australians will be living with a disability in future.

Dougie Herd, director of the Disability Council, says we need more accessible housing, designed

for a less mobile population; public buildings and workplaces that make it easier for people with disabilities to find work; and of course more accessible public transport.

The council goes further: we should have “multi-functional town squares ... capable of regenerating civic engagement and democratic participation”. We need more affordable housing and ways of allowing people to play a part in decisions about how our cities are designed.

What this would require is better, more coherent planning as urban Australia continues to spread, the suburbs creep into the bush and new communities spring up on the edges of cities such as Melbourne.

The Disability Council calls for a “rethink of planning and urban design decisions”. Professor Anthony Capon, a visiting professor and colleague of Professor McMichael at ANU, says we need a better relationship between urban planners and health professionals.

Despite the suburban sprawl, most jobs still tend to be located in the centre of our cities. The Disability Council says we need to cut the distance between our places of work, leisure and homes. Professor Capon agrees: he calls for our cities to become decentralised.

“We need a new way of thinking about our cities—better transport and better connectivity—that enables local suburban economic development,” he told the committee.

This is particularly true if we are to expand public transport routes. “What is at the end of the bus trip?” Professor Capon asks.



“Having good transport does not mean everybody lives in suburban Australia and takes the train into the CBD; it means business can function in outer suburban Australia because the workers can come in by good public transport and the goods can get away. You are actually reimagining and reinventing the cities.”

Professor Capon believes there is a danger that a sustainability charter gets broken up into “silos”—water, energy, the built environment and so on, all looked at separately.

“Cities become sustainable only when the people who live in them feel included in the ebb and flow of city life.”

He says there is a need for greater “joined-up thinking”, and that perhaps we should look not at different issues, but different environments. The environmental problems of the city are very different to those in small towns, and different again to the remote cattle-grazing regions of rural Australia.

And like the Disability Council, he calls for greater community input into these important decisions. He argues for a sustainability forum, which would allow informed debate, dialogue and decision-making.

All of these contributions take a view of sustainability that is about more than the use or abuse of our natural resources; and they take a view of health that is about more than just the incidence of disease such as diabetes. Mental health, stress and well-being are also important, as

is a sense of connectedness and empowerment.

Which brings us back to the International Council on Monuments and Sites, Peter Phillips and his Oxford college.

A heritage group such as ICOMOS is engaged in sustaining the world around us in a pretty literal way, and Mr Phillips has much to say about that in his submission to the inquiry.

Conservation is not only about holding on to old buildings and sites, but to the practices that inform them—such as the oak-tree planting builders of that college—and to the attitudes that informed those practices. In conservation, less is more.

“Traditional maintenance/repair techniques and practices ... generally use more labour and fewer materials than modern repair techniques,” Mr Phillips told MPs. They also embody a less consumer-driven way of thinking that was common only a generation or two ago, but which we have quickly forgotten.

“When a place is being preserved, the catchcry is ‘as much as necessary; as little as possible’,” he says. “So commonly we repair rather than replace; we keep old bits while ever they are still serviceable; we hoard bits of old buildings so that they can be used in future repairs.

“I suspect that most of our grandparents and, indeed, my parents had much more of the hoarder mentality than perhaps we do, keeping old paper bags, rubber bands and things of this kind rather than buying new ones. So it is those kinds of attitudinal changes that we might bring.”

Indeed, beyond the practical, there is also the importance of conservation as a cultural act.

“What are we sustaining?” he asked MPs. “I would argue that, as well as the tangible things, such as clean air and water and things of that kind, we need also to think about the intangible things which affect people’s mental and spiritual wellbeing, and cultural heritage is firmly in that category.”

ICOMOS’s view is that places of cultural significance enrich people’s lives, and give an “inspirational” sense of connection. A more connected society, rich in values, is a healthier society, and so a more sustainable one.

And by having that deeper, cultural connection to place or to the past, we also value and understand it. And that could be the key to winning people’s hearts as well as their minds in the struggle to persuade us to live sustainably.

You can’t measure environmental damage in dollars and cents alone; it’s not just the destruction of habitats, the rising medical bills of an obese generation, or the cost of investing in greener energy.

The challenge for MPs—and for all of us now—is taking the long view. ■

For more information on the inquiry into a sustainability charter being undertaken by the House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee, including access to the submissions and transcripts from public hearings, visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/environ/charter or email environment.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4580.



We need a new way of thinking about our cities, say contributors to the inquiry into a sustainability charter. Photos: AAP