The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy: Is change happening?

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Abstract
Sustainability encapsulates a different approach to government that is still being worked out around the world. Because it is a global discourse it is possible to do something quite innovative on a world scale in a small place like Western Australia. The opportunity provided by a new government with a commitment to sustainability, has been taken. A comprehensive assessment of 42 areas of government has been conducted, and after a two year process the State Sustainability Strategy has been completed. This paper sets out the basis of the State Sustainability Strategy, how it has been accepted and what is being done to implement it. It asks the fundamental question: is there any real change occurring towards sustainability in WA? Using Patsy Healy’s three levels of policy change – language, thinking and culture – it suggests that substantial moves along the first two levels have occurred but not the third.

Introduction
The Western Australian government manages an area of land the size of Western Europe yet with a population of only 1.8 million. The state has huge mineral, gas and agricultural resources and is the only developed country area to have one of the top 25 ‘biodiversity hotspots’.

In February 2001 the Gallop government was elected in WA with a mandate to stop the logging of old growth forests (the only place in the world to do this with substantial ancient forests remaining) and a commitment to develop a comprehensive State Sustainability Strategy.

This paper outlines the Strategy, its framework, key action items and process, to ask the question: “Is change happening?” This is of particular interest as few state or sub-national governments have yet completed such a sustainability strategy with nations and local governments being more than a decade ahead on such matters.

Definition and Framework
The definition of sustainability adopted in the Western Australia State Strategy is:

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1 Governance for Sustainable Development: Five OECD Case Studies, OECD, Paris
“Sustainability is meeting the needs of present and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity”.

The important words here are: ‘future’ - as governments generally don’t tend to make decisions for our children and grandchildren; and ‘integration’ – as governments generally don’t bring environmental and social factors into the mainstream of economic development but instead treat each of the three areas as distinct ‘silos’ of thinking, institutions and decision-making. The overlapping circles as shown below set out the new integrating disciplines of ecological economics, ‘sense of place’ or place management, and community health. The integration of all three areas is the new challenge required before real change can be anticipated towards sustainability². This challenge was put before the West Australian public and government over a 2 year process from mid 2001.

The Strategy fills out what is meant by sustainability by developing a set of eleven principles of sustainability, six vision statements for WA, and forty two areas of government activity that require focussed attention to see what sustainability means for them. The eleven principles are set out in Box 1.

Box 1 Principles For Sustainability

**FOUNDATION PRINCIPLES**

- **LONG TERM ECONOMIC GAIN**
  Sustainability recognises the long term needs of future generations (as well as the short term) for economic health, diversity, innovation and productivity of the earth.

- **ACCESS, EQUITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS**
  Sustainability recognises that everyone should have their interests recognised and share in the fruits of development, that an environment needs to be created where all people can express their full potential and lead productive lives, and that dangerous gaps in sufficiency, safety and opportunity endanger the earth.

- **BIODIVERSITY AND ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY**
  Sustainability recognises that all life has intrinsic value, is interconnected and that biodiversity and ecological integrity are part of the irreplaceable life support systems upon which the earth depends.

- **SETTLEMENT EFFICIENCY AND QUALITY OF LIFE**
  Sustainability recognises that settlements need to reduce their ecological footprint (ie. less material and energy demands and reductions in waste), whilst they simultaneously improve their quality of life (health, housing, employment, community…).

- **COMMUNITY, REGIONS, ‘SENSE OF PLACE’ AND HERITAGE**
  Sustainability recognises the reality and diversity of community and regions for the management of the earth, and the critical importance of ‘sense of place’ and heritage (buildings, townscape, landscapes and culture) in any plans for the future.

- **NET BENEFIT FROM DEVELOPMENT**
  Sustainability means that all development and particularly development involving extraction of non-renewable resources should strive to provide net environmental, social and economic benefit for future generations.

- **COMMON GOOD**
  Sustainability recognises that planning for the common good requires acceptance of limits to consumption of public resources (like air, water, open space) so that a shared resource is available to all.

**PROCESS PRINCIPLES**

- **INTEGRATION**
  Sustainability requires that economic, social and environmental factors be integrated by applying all the principles of sustainability at once, and seeking mutually supportive benefits with minimal trade offs.

- **ACCOUNTABILITY, TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT**
  Sustainability recognises that people should have access to information on sustainability issues, that institutions should have triple bottom line accountability on an annual basis, that regular sustainability audits of programs and policies should be conducted, and that public engagement lies at the heart of all sustainability principles.

- **PRECAUTION**
  Sustainability requires caution, avoiding poorly understood risks of serious or irreversible damage to environmental, social and economic capital, designing for surprise and managing for adaptation.

- **HOPE, VISION, SYMBOLIC AND ITERATIVE CHANGE**
  Sustainability recognises that applying these sustainability principles as part of a broad strategic vision for the earth can generate hope in the future, and thus it will involve symbolic change that is part of many successive steps over generations.
The conceptual basis of the Strategy also suggests that as well as longterm perspectives and the simultaneous integration of different disciplines, sustainability requires two other dimensions: (1) the integration of different sectors of action\(^3\), and (2) the integration of global and local thinking and action\(^4\). These are set out in the Figure below. Each circle has its own legitimacy and value but when the partnerships between these are located then real and permanent change can be expected. The global dimension is especially important as it raises the sights of communities to consider their issues in global context, a matter of importance to the Australian communities that are geographically removed from major population centres in the world. (5) Roseland M (1998) **Toward Sustainable Communities**, now society press, and Suter K (1995) **Global agenda** Albatross, Sydney.

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The geographical scale is important also because in many ways sustainability has been addressed at the global, national and local levels for 10 to 20 years – but not at the regional or state level. This level is where land is managed, cities are managed, transport, energy, water, and industrial systems are managed. It is necessary to apply sustainability at this scale and hence the WA Strategy has significance as it is one of the first to do this.

Process for Developing WA State Sustainability Strategy
The Sustainability Policy Unit was established in June 2001 and the first steps towards sustainability were to try and think about what it meant through public discourse. Work on the Strategy was begun first by developing a series of 18 public seminars and developing a set of Case Studies and Background Papers using students and academics. This unique partnership between universities and government was symbolic of the value that can be gained when a common cause can be identified. The resulting material has been placed on the Sustainability Unit website (www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au) and has created considerable interest as well as a strong base upon which to develop policy. The Case Studies are able to show what is already happening in WA on sustainability and the Background Papers summarise what has been achieved in other parts of the world.

\footnote{The Network of Regional Government for Sustainable Development nrg4SD was set up in Johannesburg in 2002 but nations and local governments first began addressing sustainable development at Rio in 1992.}
A Consultation Paper was released in December 2001 and public submissions and agency submissions were received until February 2002. These were then developed into the 240 page draft State Sustainability Strategy which was accepted by Cabinet and released for four months discussion in September 2002. Public workshops and seminars as well as presentations to industry and community groups then began and 150 were held during the submission period. The Final Strategy was formulated along with an Action Plan and a set of Partnership Agreements, and released in September 2003. Thus the State had a period of over two years to think through the concept.

Public Engagement
The Strategy process has been received with considerable interest. The evidence for this comes from the fact that many thousands of hits a day are received on the Sustainability website (over one third from overseas), there has been consistently good attendance at all the meetings, and the demand for presentations was unprecedented. Perhaps of greater significance has however been the level of engagement by people in the Strategy discussions. As stated by Bjorn Stigson, who presented at one of our Workshops:

“I am impressed by the work that you and the government of Western Australia have been doing to create a sustainable development strategy for your state. I have not come across any similar extensive process as that you are going through anywhere else in the world. It will be very interesting to follow how the next phases of your work will evolve.”


At every meeting in the city and in regions the notion of sustainability has intrigued people and demanded responses that went beyond their commonly held views. At all meetings the notion led to people discussing what the legacy of current development plans was and hence people engaged easily in issues of ethics and values. This appears to be one of the most significant characteristics of sustainability - that it encourages and enables values-based discussion on future issues rather than just expert opinion. At no stage did the discussion become party political except to recognise that it was an innovative government that had agreed to unleash this public discourse.

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The question is therefore posed: is the State Sustainability Strategy (SSS) bringing about significant change towards sustainability in WA?

**The Policy Change Process**
Professor Patsy Healy has suggested that policy change has three levels of increasing depth:

- changing language,
- changing thinking, and
- changing culture.

In the processes that have begun so far on sustainability in WA it is possible to suggest that there have been clear changes in language and some changes in thinking but very little change in general culture – yet. There has so far been little media interest and educational processes are only just beginning. Little can therefore be expected in terms of culture change. Nor would it be anticipated when there is such intense dialogue over the new concept. There are many steps to take before general culture can be engaged. However ‘vocabulary’ and ‘thinking’ are obviously being addressed in this policy arena and to some extent a change in culture of government agencies has begun. Some of the detail supporting this assessment is set out below.

**New Language**
Perhaps the best way to understand what occurred in the months after the release of the draft State Sustainability Strategy is to quote from a document written by a consultant David Galloway who used the Sustainability Strategy as the basis for a public design process in Margaret River for a new development. He began his report with the following box summarising two approaches to development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old style development is characterised by language such as -</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balance......Limited impact .... Competition.... Acceptable levels of ...... Meeting all statutory requirements..... Consultation ....Experts.... Planning.... No major effects ...... You can’t have development without .... Financial benefit....I’m only the ... Its not my responsibility...... in the ideal world, but .....Environmental / Social Impact Assessment ....Its not in the interests of....</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainability is characterised by language such as –</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net benefit ..... Change......On - going management..... Efficiency .... Inclusive......Innovation.... Design... Best practice ..... Long term ....... Participation/engagement ...... Altruism ...... Repair ...... Enhance ...... Sense of place.... Sacred ...... Economic performance...... Externalities ...... Broad based benefit ..... Partnerships...... I’m responsible ........... Networks ...... Interdependence ...... Future ......</td>
</tr>
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The importance of the Sustainability Strategy is that it has given a chance for this new style of development to be better understood and articulated. It has enabled public vocabulary and hence thinking to be changed in a way that accepts that this is the best way for WA.

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This process has been occurring in parallel with many other areas of government that have been consistent with this approach and have indeed been essential to show that it has not been an isolated exercise by the Sustainability Policy Unit. The best example perhaps of this is the front page story on the West Australian of Friday 3rd January 2003? quoting a ‘Sea Change’ in approaches to coastal development. It is also evident in the Water Strategy which was released in 2002 and used the principles of sustainability act its case. Many other examples in natural resource management, major projects and everyday government can also be cited and they over growing all the time.

A further sign that vocabulary is changing is the number of job designations that now use ‘Sustainability Officer’. There are now seven of these job titles in WA local governments alone. Bjorn Stigson explained in his recent seminar in Perth that there are now 92 of his 150 global corporations making up the World Business Council on Sustainable Development that have Vice Presidents for Sustainability as their designation. There are few VP’s for Environment as it is no longer a strategic issue whereas sustainability clearly is.

New Thinking
The notion of sustainability has not yet become common parlance and thus it has not yet touched general culture. However the Sustainability Strategy has gone beyond the mere redefinition of words, to the level of changing how policy-oriented people think about development and the future. This is an important achievement. It will become an increasingly important element of how the government works and which has created an important legacy for Western Australia. The sustainability discourse has been developed throughout the government and as suggested by Stigson above it has begun to seep into all levels of public policy discussion.

The elements of this change in thinking are mainly about the principles (above) but also the detail of the actions suggested which begin to flesh out what is meant by the principles. These are briefly outlined here though the document is the best source of information for the 336 action items (www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au).

- Institutionalising Sustainability Principles
The final State Sustainability Strategy has committed the government to create a Sustainability Act which will enable the eleven sustainability principles to be embedded across the whole of government. Other legislation for each part of government can then refer to this as its context. Manitoba has such an Act but few other State/regional governments have done this yet. The WA Act will establish the principles and require agencies to report on them.

A Sustainability Rountable will be established to enable sustainability to be facilitated through communities and business. The tasks of this broadly representative body will be:
- The implantation and further development of the State-Local Government
- Sustainability Partnership Agreement
- Community and industry Partnership Projects
- Regional Sustainability Strategies
- Global aid project facilitation
- Community education and awareness (including conferences and events)
- **State of Sustainability Reporting** and
- Revising the State Sustainability Strategy (every 2 years).

- **Embracing Sustainability in Agencies**
  All agencies have to develop Sustainability Action Plans based on a Sustainability Code of Conduct developed within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. This will encompass procurement, energy, fleet management, waste, water, triple bottom line reporting, and social responsibility (eg cross cultural training, access for people with disabilities….). As well as these internal responsibilities there have been a range of agency strategies that have begun to adopt sustainability principles and thinking in their areas of responsibility as set out in the Figure below.

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**How the Sustainability Strategy feeds into other strategies across government**

- **Contribution to Global Sustainability**
  The WA State Sustainability Strategy highlighted four key areas of global responsibility.
  1. Population, development aid and environmental technology – suggesting that Western Australian contributions to global aid particularly at the village technology level would be the most useful way to address the population issue.
  2. Biodiversity - the globally significant biodiversity of WA is a global treasure and needs to be addressed in that context. The world’s first endangered mammal species removed from the World Conservation Union list is the Western Australian Woylie. Further strategies to pursue this kind of success are outlines.
  3. Oil Vulnerability, the Gas Transition and the Hydrogen Economy - A Taskforce to examine this issue has been established encompassing
representatives from government, industry and the community to assist in the transition to pursue this kind of success are outlined.

4. Greenhouse – a separate Strategy has been developed in parallel with the State Sustainability Strategy to address this important issue.

- **Sustainability Assessment**
  A new process that ensures there is simultaneous consideration of social, economic and environmental aspects of projects and programs, is being trialled and worked through to ascertain the best internal process. The key will be an integration mechanism that can ensure net benefit outcomes in environmental, social and economic areas pursued from the start of an assessment.

- **Regional Sustainability Strategies**
  The next phase of the SSS is to develop regional approaches to sustainability. This is obvious in a State as large and diverse as WA and many of the elements of this are present in plans that are underway. However there are some suggested elements that are required to be integrated including Regional Metabolism and Ecoefficiency Studies in the environmental area and in the social area ‘Sense of Place’ studies that can tell the ‘story’ of a region (indigenous and European) leading to Place Management studies, and Community Aspiration studies that are based on visioning processes. These are summarised in the Table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Environmental</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional Plans</td>
<td>NRM Plans</td>
<td>Regional Stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Investment Tours</td>
<td>Regional Metabolism and Eco-efficiency Studies</td>
<td>(Aboriginal and European) &amp; ‘Sense of Place’ studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community Aspirations and Place Management</td>
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</table>

- **Natural resource management**
  In many ways managing land has been worked on through a sustainability lens at State level for decades. Fisheries have received WWF accreditation, forests are now saved and logging severely reduced with a shift to plantations, and agriculture has stopped clearing and is concentrating on land care. Many of these issues were further developed by bringing a stronger social dimension and with mining this focuses on how to increase indigenous employment. The greater use of the planning system through regions of local governments in NRM was also a feature of the State Sustainability Strategy.
• **Planning and Building**
Sustainability will be brought more directly into the planning of cities through new processes and guidelines. The Minister for Planning has called for a **Sustainability Scorecard** approach to all urban development. Plans will need to demonstrate how they address key sustainability criteria and those with a high score will be given bonuses and assessment time benefits. A **Toolkit and Guide to Sustainable Planning, Building and Construction** will be created to enable developers and councils to provide more sustainable urban development. This will incorporate water sensitive urban design, energy rating and Greenhouse gas implications, solar orientation, public transport, retention of trees, universal and accessible design…. Broad planning issues about **growth management** in Perth and other centres, will be part of a visioning process on the new Plan for Perth. There will be a greater emphasis on the **revitalisation of older areas**, especially in declining middle and outer areas (rather than continued urban sprawl) and ensuring there are **dense, mixed use centres** around rail lines.

• **Partnerships**
There are a range of partnerships being developed that can create on-going implementation of the change in thinking due to the Sustainability Strategy.

• **Local Government.** This partnership arose from the submission provided by the WA Local Government Association suggesting that most of the SSS recommended actions could be ‘signed off” together. As local government is responsible for local town and regional planning they have considereable power. However there are many aspects that are stretching local government beyond traditional planning into new areas of sustainability. Mainly this is considered best to be handled by regions of local government formed around the appropriate bio-region (eg drainage and other NRM issues, or social/physical region (eg transport, waste, community services and affordable housing).

• **Researchers.** The SSS has suggested the formation of a Global Centre for Sustainability as the basis of an integrated approach to sustainability research and the attraction of major international funds. The GCS has been agreed to by the 4 universities, TAFE and CSIRO, as well as the State Government and will draw industry and consultants into it as it begins to work in 2003. The notion of creating critical mass for the attraction of large scale international projects is a long term concept but immediate projects are being investigated particularly regional sustainability strategies as they are increasingly seen as a requirement for aid delivery.

• **Industry.**
The involvement of some progressive industry in the development of the SSS was critical to the changing of thinking in Western Australia. The reality of major multinationals who had over 5 years of experience in WA implementing sustainability within their own companies, was a major source of encouragement
to policy makers and politicians in the development of the SSS. The next stage will be the development of locally-applied Codes of Conduct for Corporate Social Responsibility, for Mining and Petroleum, for Eco-efficiency and Industrial Ecology. Also criteria and facilitation of Sustainability Investment Tours are being established to try and attract ethical investments to WA.

- **Community Sustainability**
  There are a number of key concepts guiding the application of sustainability to community, especially the role of community arts, community services, housing, health and education, in the development of ‘sense of place’ and social capital. The integration and focussing of these so they can simultaneously assist environmental and economic development, is the most difficult on-going part of the SSS. To assist in the process of focussing there has been an important new organization formed – the WA Collaboration – which combines peak civil society representation from conservation, unions, churches, ethnic affairs, welfare, indigenous, youth and active aging groups. Funded by Lotteries Commission, this group has been conducting extensive public consultation to develop a Community Sustainability Agenda. This has certainly contributed to a change of thinking in key social groups who have been the most recent part of the sustainability troika to be challenged into the process. The importance of the community in changing the culture towards sustainability cannot be underestimated as only they can truly create the values and visions upon which sustainability depends.

**New Culture**

The first steps towards changing culture can now be seen as the SSS is worked from new words into new thinking and new institutions. In particular the key element of institutionalising sustainability through a **Sustainability Act** and a **Sustainability Roundtable**, will be critical to the cultural step.

However all of this has barely touched broad culture. The SSS is now beginning a **Education for Sustainability** in schools and the first steps of defining an integrated **Household Sustainability Program** are outlined. These may become the basis for a more extensive application of sustainability in WA at the level of cultural change in future.

**Conclusions**

The State Sustainability Strategy has been developed as a new way of approaching government. It builds on the global work of nations, states and local government in this area over the past 15 years. However there are few sub-national areas that have developed anything quite as comprehensive, eg the SSS covers 42 areas of government whereas the Australian Government’s ESD process covered only 12 areas as it had much less direct responsibility for many of the areas covered in the WA SSS. It also has a much more coherent approach to the integration of social issues as this has become a much bigger part of the sustainability agenda globally in the past few years.

As the WA State Sustainability Strategy was began as election commitment it had to begin by a lengthy process of definition and “language change”. This quickly moved into
a process of “thinking change” as it challenged all areas of government in diversity and community to see what it meant to them.

After a two year intensive engagement the WA State Sustainability Strategy has, it appears, at least created change at the first two levels suggested by Healey. However it has yet to reach the broader culture. The question of whether it will depends on government, industry and community resources, but also whether the WA State Sustainability Strategy and the whole global process of sustainability is likely to continue to provide the key dialogue of our era. Evidence would suggest that this is likely:

1. **The Politics of Hope**
The WA State Sustainability Strategy document is aspirational with an attempt to begin to address many of the long term issues of sustainability. In this respect its importance is that it represents the politics of hope when the context in the early 21st century around the world (and in Australia) is an emphasis on the politics of fear. This is probably one of the reasons for the very extensive engagement of people in the new idea and why it is likely to continue on for some time. People need hope and sustainability is offering the only politics of hope.

2. **The Politics of Partnership**
The concept of sustainability demands an approach based on co-operation and partnerships rather than competition. It therefore challenges at a fundamental level the kinds of agendas set by the World Trade Organisation or national productivity commissions, that seek to ensure competition is observed as the key value in the economy. Sustainability challenges this but not as a traditional left approach which assets greater state control of the market. Sustainability asserts more that partnerships can create social and environmental improvement simultaneously with the competition-based economic agenda. This requires trials and demonstrations, new capacity building in government and industry, new institutions and even new laws. It will fundamentally depend on the community asserting its values and visions for a better world but there appears to be no other global agenda that is enabling that process to occur.

3. **Politics of Globalisation**
Whilst there is a reaction to the mass consumption and ‘Americanisation’ of the world there is also a deeper sense that we are part of one earth. True globalisation is therefore lifting people to see beyond the traditional squabbles of nation states to the development of new ways of thinking and living that ensure there is a global future.

The United Nations have recently declared the decade 2005 to 2015 as the Decade of Education for Sustainability. This global agenda of sustainability is therefore not likely to be going to go away. The WA State Sustainability Strategy has taken the first two steps of a long walk towards change, and the final broader cultural change can be anticipated over the years to come.