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### Democracy's Myopia: The Search for Correction Aids

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# Democracy's Myopia: The Search for Correction Aids

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That democracy, and in particular the currently dominant form of democracy, liberal democracy, has difficulty dealing with long-term challenges, has been widely recognised. This is problematic for a wide range of policy areas, but perhaps most markedly so in the environmental area. Governments have adopted a range of cognitive, policy and institutional means to 'bring in the future', but the effectiveness and implications for democracy of these are questionable. This article discusses the limitations of some of these tools, and puts forward some ideas by which the myopia of liberal-democratic systems might be diminished.

**Keywords:** environmental policy; green planning; liberal democracy; long-term policy; national sustainable development councils; sustainable development

## Introduction

Liberal-democratic political systems are often said to have difficulty addressing issues that require a long-term perspective and policy approach, or even to be incapable of meeting this need (Dryzek 1994; Sprinz 2009). Examples can be found in the area of social policy (in relation to issues such as retirement/pensions, population), infrastructure policy (long-term energy supplies, transport, urban planning), economic policy (long-term investment, employment, innovation) and environmental policy (climate change, protection of resources and ecosystems). These difficulties can be attributed to a range of reasons, including the dominance of particularistic and short-term interests, short electoral cycles and, more recently, to the dominance of neoliberal ideology (also referred to as the ideology of 'laissez-faire' or 'market fundamentalism') with its emphasis on the 'free market', a minimal role for governments and distaste for planning (Giddens and Hutton 2001, 44; Gray 1998). The obstacles to the development and implementation of long-term policy often threaten the collective and long-term interests of communities, from the local to the global level. In the case of environmental policy, it can even be argued that this inability threatens the survival of societies (Diamond 2005).

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For the purpose of this article, the starting point for the discussion is an admittedly generalised notion of democracy that is widely referred to as 'liberal democracy', a label that encompasses a wide range of 'really existing' forms of democratic systems based on some main principles: representation (via regular and free elections), the separation of powers (legislative, executive, judicial), and recognition and protection of basic individual rights (Held 1996). Liberal democracy arguably has become the 'gold standard' for political systems globally, although 'really existing' liberal democracies vary in specific institutional arrangements and discussion continues about the extent to which they are deemed 'truly' democratic (Dahl 1989; Dryzek 1996; Eckersley 2004).

From the 1960s, when the environment became a new focal area for public policy (Caldwell 1963), governments have developed and introduced a wide range of policies and institutions aimed at addressing environmental issues. There has been variability in the environmental performance of governments (Esty et al. 2010; Jahn 1998; Scruggs 2003), but none can be said to have succeeded in meeting the challenges inherent to the environmental *problématique*.

Some argue that authoritarian political systems will be needed to deal with the mounting environmental pressures in individual countries and around the world (Ophuls and Boyan 1992; Shearman and Smith 2007), but the environmental performance of such systems (such as in the former Soviet Union, and China), if anything, has been worse than in liberal democracies (Economy 2004; Shapiro 2001). More recently, China has made significant progress in some areas, notably the development of renewable energy and enhancing energy efficiency (Liu 2009), but it is by opening the door to NGOs, grassroots participation, the media and even international organisations, that the regime seeks to advance a more effective implementation of its policies (Economy 2005; Turner and Zhi 2006).

Most environmental analysts and advocates take the view that liberal-democratic systems are better able to deal with the environmental challenge than non-democratic (autocratic) systems, and that enhancing or 'deepening' rather than reducing democracy, through a variety of (notably deliberative) means, is both a more desirable and promising strategy for dealing with this challenge (Baber and Bartlett 2005; Dryzek 1994; Eckersley 2004). Even if empirical evidence for this thesis is ambiguous (Ward 2008), environmental advocates cannot ignore that democracy, with all the limitations associated with existing forms, has more than instrumental value but reflects ideas and ideals of a fundamental nature constitutive of inter-human relations (and some would say, also of the relations between humans and non-human nature). Compromising democracy for environmental reasons, even if this were to enhance the environmental effectiveness of collective choice and action, can be regarded as unacceptable (Beckman 2008) and/or highly risky. A more promising and desirable approach to dealing with the limitations of liberal democracy, therefore, is to seek ways by which existing democratic systems can enhance their environmental effectiveness *and* their democratic credentials.

In the following three sections, I discuss three categories of means or tools (cognitive, policy and institutional) which governments of liberal democracies have used to 'bring the future' into their policies and institutions, identifying strengths and weaknesses. The fourth section offers some ideas for how democracy's myopia could be diminished.

### Cognitive Means for Integrating the Future

Integrating the future into decisions and policies presumes, first of all, recognition that doing so is desirable, important or even essential. However, whether the longer term is even considered depends on a range of factors, including the cognitive frameworks within which decision-making and policy-making are developed.

Integrating future considerations into the decisions, policies and institutions of liberal-democratic societies through cognitive means refers to tools, mechanisms and frameworks that guide the interpretation of 'issues' and how these can or should be addressed. Such means fall largely into two sub-categories: tools and mechanisms for the generation of data, information and knowledge about future developments, which can then be used to inform decisions on issues; and views, frameworks or principles that provide a substantive and normative basis for the development of policies and institutional design and change.

From the early 1970s, a range of tools and approaches have been developed in order to assess what the future holds in store, aiding decision-making to identify alternative courses of action. Among these are Delphi methods, foresight exercises, simulation models, scenario planning and statistical methods, robust decision-making, adaptive control and agent-based modelling; many of these have been applied to environmental issues (Lempert, Scheffran and Sprinz 2009). Scenario development, for instance, was used in the famous 'Limits to Growth' report published by the Club of Rome as the basis for illustrating possible future environmental/resource conditions and pressures at different rates of economic and population growth (Meadows et al. 1972; Meadows, Randers and Meadow 2005).

Uncertainty, insufficient knowledge and understanding of the 'real world', as well as the unavoidability of having to simplify and make assumptions, will always render such tools subject to errors and critique. This does not necessarily diminish their usefulness or value, as all decisions, whether or not such tools are used, suffer from the same predicament. A more important limitation of these tools is that they can only aid decision-makers; they cannot *prescribe* a desirable future. What a desirable future looks like is foremost a values-based, political-ideological matter. Despite the use of such (limited) anticipatory means in liberal democracies, they seem to have had no significant influence on (long-term) policy directions or institutions. Nor are there any indications that they have altered the views of governments on a desirable future.

There is growing recognition that, to effectively address environmental problems, environmental concerns and considerations need to be integrated, in a meaningful way, into all areas of thinking, decision-making and practices that affect the environment, including economics, energy, transport and agriculture (Bührs 2009; European Environment Agency 2005; Persson 2009). The notion or discourse of sustainable development offers a broad cognitive framework that heeds long-term social, environmental and economic values and that, given the extent to which it has been adopted internationally at all levels of government, and in civil society and (increasingly) the business sector, already is the most popular and widely used framework for environmental integration (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2007; Prizzia 2007).

The notion of sustainable development is not without its problems, and some argue that it has become a meaningless and widely abused discourse that mainly serves non-environmental interests, but it should not be discarded, for several reasons. First, debate continues about how sustainability should be interpreted to make it (more) meaningful (Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Neumayer 1999). Public discourse functions as a large pool of ideas, critiques and demands that continue to influence the implementation of the idea. Related to this, a significant amount of research and discussion is undertaken about how the concept can be applied to the economic sphere, for instance, in the form of sustainable-development indicators and green accounting (Bartelmus and Seifert 2003; Pedersen and Haan 2006), and/or by operationalising it in terms of ‘environmental space’, based on the recognition of environmental limits and equity considerations (Rice 2007; Spangenberg 2002). Third, the notion of sustainable development has already led to a significant amount of social mobilisation, especially at the local level (Bulkeley and Betsill 2005). Local initiatives and action aimed at advancing sustainability are meaningful in the eyes of many people, and often involve processes that encourage the participation of citizens, illustrating how advancing sustainable development can be compatible with the enhancement of democracy (Arias-Maldonado 2000; Warburton 1998).

### **Integrating the Future in Policy**

Given the dominance of short-term and sectional interests in liberal democracies, long-term policy development and implementation has always been problematic. In the past 25 years, this has been aggravated by the dominance of the neoliberal cognitive framework, which moved governments away from ‘steering’, and even more so from ‘planning’, shifting the emphasis towards decision-making by the ‘free market’. In many policy areas, this has meant abandoning the limited efforts towards long-term policy development that were seen as desirable or important in the pre-neoliberal era, notably in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1930s and in the aftermath of the Second World War.

In many countries, environmental policy development seems to have escaped this development. Growing environmental problems, recognition that environmental policy fragmentation was not only ineffective but also costly, and international pressure for the development of more comprehensive and long-term policy (notably in the wake of the publication of the *Brundtland Report* in 1987) led many governments to adopt sustainable development strategies, national environmental action plans or other forms of ‘green planning’. Early leaders were the Netherlands, Canada, Australia and a handful of African countries that were more or less forced in this direction as a condition for continued financial assistance by the World Bank (Bührs 2000; De Jongh and Captain 1999; Falloux and Talbot 1993). By the beginning of the 21st century, green planning seemed to have become something of a global norm, as close to 140 countries were said to have adopted some kind of green plan (Jørgens 2003, 16, 19–20).

Green planning stands for the idea that an overarching, substantive and long-term environmental policy framework is needed to guide the integration

of environmental concerns across all policy areas that (potentially) have a significant environmental impact. As such, it aims to contribute to the greening of non-environmental policy areas, including energy, transport, agricultural and economic policies, in a coherent and consistent manner. It is based on substantive environmental parameters or imperatives that are translated into specific objectives and targets and timeframes for all major environmental issues and for all sectors. Aiming to provide coherence and consistency between what is commonly regarded as environmental policy (such as pollution-control policy, waste management and climate-change policy), and efforts towards the greening of non-environmental policies, it has been referred to as a form of policy-internal environmental integration (Bührs 2009, 121–46).

As always, there is a discrepancy between ideal-type policy and actual policy performance. In many countries that have adopted some form of green planning, these efforts have fallen short of the criteria of ‘good’ green planning (Jänicke and Jörgens 1998). Moreover, in most cases, the implementation of such plans leaves much to be desired, and in quite a few countries the adoption of a green plan has turned out to be a ‘one-shot exercise’. The main reason for the demise of these efforts, and for their poor implementation, has been dwindling political support, in particular after changes of government, often reflecting a shift in priorities from environmental to economic and social concerns (Bührs 2000; 2009, 131–41). Despite the supposedly inherent long-term nature of green planning, the lifespan of such efforts is often not longer than one or two terms of government. The experience with green planning illustrates not so much a difficulty with the *introduction* of such policies, but with their survival and continued *implementation*. This raises the question of whether policies governments adopt as ‘long-term’ policies, but without the support of the major opposition parties or their institutionalisation, actually deserve the label.

Green planning in the Netherlands, often referred to as exemplary, has demonstrated its limits as a means of environmental integration. The fourth Dutch *National Environmental Policy Plan*, adopted in 2001, with a frankness which is unusual in a government publication, acknowledges the need for systemic change, involving all sectors, if sustainability is to be achieved. The plan introduced the concept of ‘transition management’, sparking off a discussion about how such change can be brought about (Murphy 2007; Smith, Stirling and Berkhout 2005). This field is still young, but it has already been noted that there is a tendency for experts and vested interests to dominate the discourse, as well as its application in practice, effectively turning it into a rather traditional technocratic approach towards ‘planning the future’ (Hendriks 2009; Smith and Kern 2009). Hence, ‘transition management’ is a form of long-term policy aimed at achieving sustainability, but it may not provide much scope for public input into the process.

Despite these shortcomings and limitations, the move towards green planning can be regarded as positive, a significant improvement on the fragmented, incoherent, reactive and even more ineffective approach to environmental policy development that was common until the 1980s (and still is in many countries). Comparative analyses of green planning experiences expose ways in which it can be improved (Dalal-Clayton 1996; Jänicke and Jörgens 1998),

which seems more productive than dismissing it for not having resolved, or even addressed, the roots of the environmental problématique.

### **Bringing in the Future by Institutional Reform**

Potentially, there are many ways by which the future can be brought into the realm of institutions. Institutions can be defined as the formal and informal rules and organisations (which are ‘bundles of rules’ around certain aims or functions) that guide or channel human behaviour and practices in political, economic and sociocultural spheres, signalling what to do or not to do, and what should or must be done or not. Here, I discuss some of the ways long-term environmental interests and concerns have already been integrated into the political-institutional frameworks of (a number of) liberal democracies. In particular, I focus on the institutionalisation of broad aims or principles, the entrenchment of policies and the establishment of agencies with a future/environment-oriented mandate.

Aiming to influence and change the dominant cognitive framework by infusing ideas, views, beliefs and principles into human awareness and thinking is a core element of what can be referred to as ‘critical constructivism’ (Eckersley 2004, 9). Given the dominance of political-economic interests in liberal-democratic societies, spreading and building support for ideas that assign importance to long-term/environmental values and interests is a key challenge for environmental advocates. The institutionalisation of such ideas can be seen as an important step towards the greening of the dominant institutional framework, assigning them legitimacy and a formal status that possibly can be used to influence policy development and to promote further institutional change.

As noted above, the ‘idea’ of sustainable development provides a cognitive framework that can guide long-term decision-making and policymaking. In many countries, sustainable development has been institutionalised and become a norm or even a legal requirement, incorporated into a raft of general and specific legislation (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000). The crux, as discussed above, lies in how the notion is interpreted and implemented. The institutionalisation of sustainable development may have (had) some effect on policies and practices, but research indicates that liberal democracies only promote ‘weak sustainability’ (Ward 2008).

The precautionary principle has been institutionalised in a range of political constituencies, notably in legislation regulating the possible introduction of new but ‘risky’ technologies, such as in the area of bio-technology (Bro-Rasmussen 2003; Myers 2004). The principle originated from Germany, where it has been institutionalised and applied across the broad spectrum of policies (Boehmer-Christiansen 1994). It has been said that the United States and Japan do not like it (O’Riordan and Cameron 1994), but others have argued that, *de facto*, the principle has also been institutionalised and applied in the former country (Bodansky 1994; Jasanoff 2003). Together with several other principles aimed at environmental protection, it has been enshrined in European Community law (da Cruz Vilaça 2004), and the World Trade Organization has also adopted it (Sampson 2005). Eckersley referred to the precautionary principle as one of the most significant means for protecting environmental interests: ‘no single decision rule is likely to do more to represent the interests of both ecological citizens and the new environmental constituency’ (Eckersley 1996, 232).

Like sustainable development, the precautionary principle can and has been interpreted in 'weak' and 'strong' ways (Gardiner 2006). There are advocates of a rather narrow (biophysical), science-based interpretation, making its application akin to that of 'risk assessment', a tool developed and used most in the US (Jasanoff 2003). Others favour a broader interpretation, including social, ethical and political concerns, leaving space for value judgements (O'Brien 2003). This makes the precautionary principle a contested or perhaps even a 'shambolic' concept (O'Riordan and Cameron 1994), but does not necessarily diminish the importance of its institutionalisation. Perhaps its greatest significance lies in the fact that the precautionary principle reverses the burden of proof from those who point out the potential risks and adverse effects associated with the adoption of new technologies to the advocates thereof. Inasmuch as many of the potentially adverse implications of new technologies may only show up or be felt in the long term, the role of the precautionary principle in preventing or minimising environmental damage in the future can be significant.

Arguably the most direct way to bring long-term (environmental) concerns to the attention of governments is to create formal advisory agencies with a mandate to explore future scenarios. In pre-neoliberal times, many countries had special bodies that were engaged in some form of long-term research and/or planning. More recently, in the wake of the publication of the *Brundtland Report* and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, many governments created national sustainable development councils (NSDCs) or similar bodies to provide advice or assistance with regard to the adoption and implementation of some form of green planning, as discussed above. Potentially, such councils can play a significant role in advising the government how environmental concerns can be integrated into long-term policies across various policy areas. Unfortunately, in many countries, the effectiveness of the councils appears to be limited, with little or no influence on core mainstream policies, and some are little more than 'talk-shops'. Moreover, their own long-term survival often proves to be problematic given their lack of a legally entrenched status (Bühns 2009, 140; d'Evie et al. 2000; Maurer 1999, 195–98).

### **A Few Alternatives**

The discussion has hitherto focused on some of the means which governments of liberal democracies have adopted with the aim of integrating future considerations into their decisions, policies and institutions. Having found fault or weaknesses with these 'aids', identifying better (and also realistic) options is no easy task. Here, I present a few ideas that have not been implemented, but that can still be regarded as relatively modest: extending the electoral cycle, the creation of an environmental reserve bank and a variation on NSDCs.

Given the relatively short electoral cycles (three to five years) in most liberal democracies, which induce governments to focus mainly on issues that they can address with more or less success within their term of office (to enhance their chances of re-election), extending the electoral cycle could encourage governments to adopt a longer term view in the development of policy. This idea raises several questions: how long would the electoral cycle need to be to make a difference? What would be the qualitative implications for democracy? Would longer electoral cycles also be likely to ensure that long-term

environmental concerns were given greater or sufficient weight in decision-making and policymaking?

The definition of 'long-term' is largely dependent on context (one week, or even a day, may be deemed 'long-term' in the life of a currency trader) and to some extent arbitrary, but in the realm of environmental concerns and matters it is reasonable to think of long-term in terms of decades and even centuries. It is now accepted that combating climate change will take hundreds of years. Even adapting to climate change, which requires significant changes to the infrastructure in most countries, can be expected to take decades. More generally, moving societies, and the world as a whole, towards sustainable systems (energy, transport, urban/spatial, industrial) will be a long-term affair, requiring considerable steering on the part of governments, from the local to the global level. To make this happen, policies and institutions will need to be developed and adopted that, with some degree of flexibility, will need to be pursued consistently during similar timeframes.

If one wanted to avoid the risk of policy 'flip-flops' from one government to the next, there are roughly two options: either governments should be elected for at least a decade if not longer, or some way must be found to create policy platforms that enjoy widespread support across the political spectrum and that are likely to hold for a long time.

Electing governments for terms of at least a decade raises serious accountability issues, especially in political systems where power is concentrated in the executive, and where there are few checks and balances. Having a much longer electoral cycle may require the introduction of more checks on the government, to be politically acceptable. What these would be is a question that cannot be answered here, but the answers are likely to vary between countries and political systems.

It is also highly uncertain whether longer electoral cycles would ensure that environmental concerns receive the attention and weight that they need. Arguably, governments would have much more time to pursue unpopular policies that are considered to be 'good' or necessary for the country. However, as long as the dominant cognitive paradigm, and much of the existing institutional framework, remains biased towards economic interests, it seems unlikely that just lengthening the electoral cycle would deliver stronger, future- and sustainability-oriented environmental policies.

A second idea is to create an environmental reserve bank, either by reforming the existing reserve bank, or by creating a separate organisation. The rationale behind this idea is that, to ensure the long-term health of the economy and the environment, certain parameters and 'intervention' mechanisms can be identified and must be implemented independently from government. At the moment, the only parameter that is deemed sufficiently important to a healthy economy to warrant protection from 'political intervention' is the money supply, with interest rates and the (loose) regulation of credit being the main intervention mechanisms used to 'control' it. This idea has gained virtually sacred status in neoliberal economic thinking and practice, but it can be questioned on both economic and environmental grounds. Economically, there is much more to a healthy economy than a low rate of inflation (employment and equitability in income and wealth being just a few other factors), but these are presently not of concern to reserve banks. Perhaps even more importantly,

maintaining economic and environmental health requires the protection of the resource and ecological basis that makes production and consumption possible. Dominant economic theory, policies and institutions almost completely ignore the biophysical reality that underlies economies, treating the economy as a separate/isolated system rather than as a subsystem of the ecosystem (Daly 1996, 45–60).

Expanding the role of the existing reserve bank or creating a new environmental reserve bank to protect the long-term health of the environmental/resource base would be based on a different, ecological conception of economics and economic performance. The assumption that economic growth automatically implies an improvement in the well-being of most people in society is increasingly being drawn into question (Douthwaite 1993; Hamilton 2003). The development of green economic theory and sustainability indicators is still very much a work in progress (Jackson 2009; Victor 2008), but it is not unthinkable that a reserve bank could introduce and use some new measure(s) of economic, resource or social health as a basis for ‘intervention’. For instance, brakes could be put on further development of certain areas or the exploitation of resources if ecological or resource indicators show a decline that is considered unacceptable, triggering the imposition of taxes, legal constraints or an outright halt to particular activities.

Whether this is actually a desirable way to go is a different matter. Granting such important powers to an ‘expert-based’ agency, and isolating it from ‘political intervention’, raises serious questions regarding the merits of purely expert-based decision-making (assumedly value-free), accountability and democracy. Moreover, the nature of this kind of intervention is mainly reactive; measures are triggered when things turn sour, and do not provide positive guidance towards a desirable future or scenario.

A more positive option would be to create a stronger and more democratic version of the NSDCs discussed above. Such a council could be put on a statutory basis, enabling it to operate independently from government. The rationale for such a construction is to enable society, rather than the government, to engage in the development of a long-term vision, based on credible scenarios. Given the apparent inability of liberal-democratic governments to develop and implement long-term policy, it can be argued that, given its importance, this task cannot be left to ‘governments-of-the-day’, but must be entrusted to a separate, but also democratic, institution. Such an institution should have more than a symbolic or advisory role, and could be given the power and ability to ensure that the long-term interests and objectives defined on behalf of society are given effect.

How this can be achieved is a question that raises considerable constitutional complexities. If a long-term policy developed and adopted by an NSDC is to have formal status or even supremacy, this would impinge on the traditional role of the executive and legislative powers in liberal-democratic systems. To legitimise a new agency, it would almost certainly need to be elected directly by the people. Councillors could be elected for a 10-year term, but not all in the same year, to enable the infusion of new or changing attitudes in society. The scope of ‘long-term’ policy as distinct from other policy, and the roles, responsibilities and powers of an NSDC and the existing executive and legislative bodies of government, would need to be clearly (re-)defined to avoid

a continuous turf battle between the institutions. Notwithstanding such efforts towards clarification and separation, there would also be a need for a constitutional court to rule on matters of conflict.

Governments would remain responsible for day-to-day policy development, but they would not be able to ignore the long-term policy developed and adopted by an agency on behalf of society. An NSDC would analyse and critically assess the government's policies on the extent to which they advance or divert from the stated objectives. It could be given 'teeth' by giving it the right to veto policies and/or proposed legislation that is considered to be incompatible with and harmful to the long-term objectives that have been adopted.

To give an NSDC the capacity to make well-informed choices, it would need to be supported by a solid body of advisors, including independent scientists and experts. To ensure that the government cannot undermine its functioning and capacity, the allocation of funding to the agency would need to be regulated separately from the government's budgetary process, and constitutionally ring-fenced. Equally, the existence of an NSDC itself needs to be constitutionally entrenched, although it should be recognised that, ultimately, democracy implies it should be possible to disestablish such an agency by a qualified majority in parliament and/or by referendum.

Creating an agency along the lines suggested above, many may argue, is politically unrealistic. It certainly amounts to more than a minor change to the prevailing institutional arrangements in 'really existing' liberal-democratic systems, and such a proposal inevitably engenders strong opposition from many quarters. Therefore, in many countries, the creation of NSDCs with more modest powers is likely to be more realistic, while their institutionalisation, and that of green planning (like in the Netherlands), may already be an important and ambitious step forward.

However, what is deemed politically realistic or utopian is very much in the eye of the beholder, and is time-bound and influenced by prevailing interests. Given the immense pressures on existing democratic systems by environmental, economic and social developments, which some refer to as converging crises creating a 'perfect storm' (Heinberg 2011, location 229), their capacity and legitimacy is increasingly called into question. It may be more realistic to expect such developments to lead to the erosion rather than strengthening of democracy, but that does not make it any more desirable. Hence, we should not dismiss out of hand the search for alternatives of the kind put forward here.

## Conclusion

Liberal democracies have difficulty taking the longer view. This is particularly problematic in view of the environmental challenges facing humanity, as addressing many of these challenges requires consistency in policy over decades or even longer. Short electoral cycles and the predominance of sectional interests dictate a political rationality that induces governments to largely discount the future. The problem manifests itself most clearly with regard to climate change, but applies fundamentally to the environmental *problématique* as a whole.

The three categories of means or ways discussed in this article (cognitive, policy and institutional) can be seen as complementary planks for reform:

changing the dominant cognitive framework to enable society to 'see' the importance of taking into account the long term is a precondition for changes in behaviour and practices to accommodate future interests, and for the acceptance of the need for institutional change. Institutions guide and channel human behaviour and practices, and shape and influence policies. Policies, in turn, can have an 'educative' effect on people, and are the common means through which institutional change is sought and realised. Hence, a concerted approach of mutually supportive efforts on all three fronts is likely to offer the best prospects for effecting change.

The experiences with the means and tools discussed in this article seem to confirm the complementary nature of these three categories. To be meaningful, the rhetoric of sustainable development needs to be translated into policies and practices, such as through green planning. Green planning without a strong institutional basis tends to have a short lifespan; a clear 'vision' (a cognitive basis) of what is to be done to achieve sustainability needs to guide green planning. Sustainability and other principles that heed environmental and future interests will be given more serious consideration, however, if their importance has been formally recognised (institutionalised). Integrating future (environmental) concerns in liberal democracies is likely to be more effective and enduring, therefore, if a combination of means, tools and actions are used in a concerted and strategic manner.

The creation of an NSDC, firmly institutionalised and mandated with responsibility for green planning, based on research and widespread public input and deliberation aimed at the operationalisation of a sustainable future scenario, arguably is one of the more strategic, effective and realistic options for integrating the future in the decisions, policies and institutions of liberal democracies. The details for such a council need to be determined in the context in which it is to operate, but its effectiveness is likely to be enhanced if it were constitutionally entrenched, given formal powers and funding independent from the government, and if its members were elected by and representative of the wider society.

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