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Pathways Towards Sustainability: The Australian Approach

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ABSTRACT *Following its rise to international prominence, sustainability has become an official principle or goal in many countries. Due to contextual differences, countries have followed different paths in the pursuit of sustainability. Approaches can be classified into three categories: green planning; institutional reform; and social mobilization. None of these courses on its own is likely to achieve sustainability. Yet, countries often appear to develop a path dominated by one of these approaches. This paper focuses on Australia, sketches the extent to which green planning, institutional reform and social mobilization have been playing a role in the pursuit of sustainability, and illustrates the difficulties of developing a pathway that combines these approaches.*

Introduction

Sustainability has been embraced as a sound basis for integrating environmental, social and economic decision making for over a decade and Australia, like many countries, has adopted this principle as the cornerstone of its efforts to address environmental challenges. But what does the adoption of the discourse of sustainability by governments mean? Does use of the concept in legislation, policies and programmes amount to anything more than symbolism? Radical environmentalists distrust the embrace of this discourse by governments, and especially by business (Beder, 1993, 1997; Korten, 1995), as it may be a cover for business-as-usual or shallow rhetoric to win votes or placate customers or shareholders (Lumley, 1999). On the other hand, the penetration of the discourse into these realms is depicted as the beginning of systematic change, or "incremental radicalism" (Torgerson, 1995, p. 16).

What the adoption of sustainability as a principle or goal by governments really means is a question that can only be answered by empirical research and analysis. There is a growing interest in analysing and comparing national-level approaches, as reflected in the burgeoning field of comparative environmental policy analysis. One branch of that literature focuses primarily on environmental *policy* developments, and the phenomenon of 'green planning' in particular (Falloux & Talbot, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Dalal-Clayton, 1996). Another

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branch concentrates more on how the sustainability agenda has led to *institutional* government responses (Papadakis, 1996; Jänicke & Weidner, 1997; O'Riordan & Voisey, 1997). A third body of literature, dealing in particular with sustainable development in developing countries, focuses on *social mobilization*, and the importance of (promoting) a grass-roots approach to sustainability (Durning, 1989; Ghai, 1994; Mander & Goldsmith, 1996; Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997).

In this paper, we argue that each of these three approaches to sustainability is unlikely to succeed on its own, but also that combining them is problematic, as these approaches are associated with different, often conflicting, rationales. The pathways towards sustainability taken by countries vary in the extent to which they rely on each of these approaches, or combinations of them, reflecting differences in political-economic, social and environmental forces, conditions and developments. Our own research and reading of the literature on developments in Australia and other countries, in particular New Zealand, the Netherlands and Canada (Bührs & Bartlett, 1993; Bührs, 1996; Aplin, 1997a, 1997b, 1998), suggests that governments tend to follow a path of least resistance, a course that is perceived to be *politically* least problematic, rather than what is deemed ecologically rational or necessary. In Australia, as in Canada, the Federal Government appears reluctant to adopt a strong stance on environmental matters, failing to use its full, though admittedly limited, constitutional powers in this area. Except at times when the environment enjoys a high level of public support, it is inclined to "pass the buck" to other levels of government (Harrison, 1996), the private sector, communities and individual citizens. Institutional reform, often difficult to achieve given vested interests and delicate federal–state relations, appears, when it does occur, to be directed more at further devolving power to the states, rather than at strengthening environmental institutions at the federal and/or state level.

Using this classification, this paper analyses the Australian pathway towards sustainability. First, the three approaches identified are clarified. Second, the extent to which Australia has relied on each approach is sketched in (necessarily) broad lines. Third, conclusions are drawn about the Australian path chosen so far and about the possibility or prospect for the three approaches to be combined in the future.

Pathways Towards Sustainability

More than 10 years after the concept of sustainability was catapulted into international prominence by the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987), it continues to arouse much debate about how it should be defined or interpreted (Redclift, 1992; Torgerson, 1995; Dobson, 1996; Lafferty, 1996; McManus, 1996). By now, it has become apparent that trying to force agreement on its empirical and/or normative meaning is neither productive nor desirable, given the plurality of cognitive and normative systems that has evolved between and within cultures and countries. Sustainability will remain a contested concept, and should be regarded as a *discourse*, rather than as a concept to be defined with any precision (Dryzek, 1997, p. 125). Rather than try to force agreement on what sustainability means, it seems to make more sense to accept a plurality of views and to allow for a

"disaggregated approach" to the concept (Dryzek, 1997, p. 129; O'Riordan & Voisey, 1997).

Accepting a plurality of views on sustainability does not answer, however, the question of what the adoption of sustainability as a principle or goal by *governments* means. That question can only be answered by empirical research. What consequence have governments given to its introduction? How have governments approached and implemented it?

On the basis of our reading of the literature, and our own empirical research, we identify three approaches that governments appear to have taken: a green planning (rational policy) approach; an institutional reform approach; and a social mobilization approach. Each approach is associated with a different rationale and logic. But although these may clash and sometimes seem incompatible, they can also be woven together. *Politics*, rather than logic or environmental necessity, determines which approach or combination of approaches is taken by a government at a particular time. The three approaches are firstly explained further, then the questions of compatibility and of combining approaches are revisited.

The Green Planning Approach

One of the principal means by which the concept of sustainability has been implemented in many countries is by the development of green planning. This approach focuses on the formulation and implementation of longer-term sustainability policies or strategies (under a variety of labels, including green plans, sustainable development strategies and National Environmental Action Plans) that portend to be comprehensive, covering a broad array of environmental problems, and integrative, formulating goals and means of achieving them across policy areas or sectors. Among developed countries, the Netherlands and Canada have been leaders in this field (Johnson, 1995), although the approach was first introduced in developing countries (Falloux & Talbot, 1993). By 1994, it was estimated that more than 100 countries had adopted some form of green planning (Carew-Reid *et al.*, 1994, p. 40). Perhaps the most conceptually and practically advanced example can be found in the Netherlands, where specific objectives and targets have been formulated for all major economic sectors (target groups) with the ambitious aim of achieving a sustainable Netherlands within one generation (by 2010) (Falloux & Talbot, 1995; Johnson, 1995; Bührs, 1996; Dalal-Clayton, 1996).

The growing popularity among governments of the green planning approach since the late 1980s can be explained on the basis of international developments, notably the Brundtland Commission's call on countries to develop sustainable development strategies, and its endorsement through the adoption of *Agenda 21* at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992 (WCED, 1987; UNCED, 1992, chapter 8). Although a comprehensive and integrated approach to environmental policy development is badly needed, and the development of green plans and strategies therefore to be applauded in principle, this approach is highly problematic in theory and practice (Bartlett, 1990). Despite some up-beat accounts (Johnson, 1995), the experience with green planning so far is rather mixed, and definitely faltering in some countries, for example Canada, one of the pioneers (Dalal-Clayton, 1996).

One of the problems with this approach is the tendency for plans or strategies to be formulated in a technical and top-down manner, in line with the nature of the *rational policy* tradition, despite the emphasis of its advocates on the importance of public participation. The extent of societal participation allowed is often rather limited or even completely lacking (ibid.) and control is retained by politicians and bureaucrats at the national level, who *de facto* initiate and 'own' such plans.[1] Under a green planning scenario, therefore, what is sustainable is determined largely in a top-down manner by the government of the day, within the realm of bureaucratic and political feasibility. A related problem of this approach is that it lends itself to symbolic politics. The rhetoric of green plans and strategies may be impressive, but their implementation minimal or non-existing (Wintle, 1994; Bührs, 1996; Bührs & Bartlett, 1997).

The Institutional Reform Approach

A second way by which sustainability has been given consequence by national governments is through institutional reform (O'Riordan & Voisey, 1997). Here, the term 'institution' is interpreted broadly to refer to relatively enduring rules (formal and informal), traditions, customs and routines that guide human behaviour. Organizations, which channel (often routinize) behaviour on the basis of mandates, goals and rules, are an active part of the institutional framework. As much of what people do on a day-to-day basis is channelled or guided by institutions (by providing positive and negative incentives and disincentives of various kinds), institutional reform offers a potentially very powerful means of changing behaviour and therefore for addressing problems associated with behaviour.

Institutionalizing sustainability in the form of rules (for instance, in legislation and regulations) can encourage or enforce environmentally responsible behaviour and deter or constrain environmentally damaging practices. Organizational reform which strengthens the role, position and power of environmental agencies can be a significant means of reinforcing environmental values and interests, and/or the advocates of sustainability within the institutional framework. Examples of institutional changes that (presumably) promote sustainability are the inclusion of sustainability as a principle or goal in legislation (as in New Zealand's *Resource Management Act*),[2] and the setting up of agencies with the prime role of advocating sustainability or sustainable development (such as the Parliamentary Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development in Canada).[3] Institutional reform is seen by many environmental analysts and advocates as a key to changing the political, economic and social structures that stand in the way of a more sustainable world (Knoepfel, 1995; Papadakis, 1996; Jänicke & Weidner, 1997).

Institutional reform, in fact, has become a kind of 'philosopher's stone' in governance issues, and is often advocated by people across the ideological spectrum as *the* means of resolving problems of all kinds. Institutional analysis has become (or re-emerged as) a major stream in political science (where it is referred to as the 'new institutionalism'), sociology and economics (March & Olsen, 1984, 1989; Lane, 1990; Lowndes, 1996). In many countries, major public sector reforms undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s have been inspired by institutional economics (New Right) theories and the New Public Management

approach, and have had the declared purpose of increasing efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability (Boston, 1991; Hood, 1991; Self, 1993).

The fact that institutional reform is sought and practised from different, and often conflicting, positions is one aspect of the difficulty of the 'sustainability by institutional reform' pathway. Proposals for institutional reform to strengthen environmental values and environmental advocacy inevitably face institutionally entrenched interests, and often face conflicting agendas for reform, as well. To some extent, reforms introduced under the New Public Management umbrella may be compatible with those advocated by environmentalists, particularly where the state has been involved in sponsoring environmental vandalism, but views diverge when it comes to belief in the relative importance of markets and participatory mechanisms for making collective choices (Dryzek, 1997, pp. 102–119). A reform of environmental institutions may be more a by-product of a broader programme of reform directed at rolling back the state and devolving responsibilities to the market, rather than motivated by environmental considerations (Bührs & Bartlett, 1993, pp. 90–112). The extent to which a concern about sustainability acts as an energizing force behind institutional reform in its own right appears to be rather limited (O'Riordan & Voisey, 1997).

But even if formal institutions are reformed for environmental or sustainability reasons, there is no guarantee that such reforms have the desired result. Entrenched human behaviour and resistance to change are not simply overcome by changing formal rules or organizational structures. Institutional change usually is unsettling and costly, in human and financial terms, often has unintended consequences and may bring a temporary or even permanent decline in organizational capacity. It has been shown that, in many instances, institutional and organizational reform did not achieve the expected or desired results (March & Olsen, 1983; Scharpf, 1986). And, as with green planning, there may be a symbolic element to it; institutional change may be used to give the impression that something positive is being done (a committee set up to keep the critics quiet) without any real change occurring.

The Social Mobilization Approach

A third pathway towards sustainability that is often advocated is that of social mobilization. Rather than relying on governments to take the lead, or to expect (too) much of institutional change at the national level, advocates of social mobilization put their faith and hope in communities (the grass-roots). As communities are closest to the action when it comes to putting sustainability into practice, this approach can be seen as a more direct means of effecting real change. Local knowledge and experience, as well as community ownership of initiatives or projects, are seen as essential conditions for effectively translating sustainability into action. When communities adopt the sustainability challenge, they are likely to link social (equity and quality of life), economic and ecological concerns, and therefore take the integrated approach that is often argued as essential to achieve sustainability. Whereas the green planning approach may be labelled 'top-down', the social mobilization approach is usually characterized as 'bottom-up' (Barbier, 1987, pp. 102, 107; WCED, 1987). This approach emphasizes the importance of support and action at the grass-roots or community level. Local knowledge and experience, as well as com-

munity ownership of initiatives or projects, are seen as essential conditions for effectively translating sustainability into action.

Although the importance of public participation in decision making and implementation is recognized in much of the (environmental) policy literature, it has received particular emphasis in writings on development in low-income nations, often in reaction to the perceived failures of large-scale, top-down development projects initiated and controlled by central governments, international agencies and overseas investors. Many such projects have proved to be social, ecological and economic disasters, leading to increased inequality, poverty, community disintegration, social dislocation, debt accumulation and a decline in self-sufficiency (Redclift, 1987; Adams, 1990; Durning, 1989; Korten, 1995).

As a reaction, alternative approaches have emerged, emphasizing the importance of public participation and the role of communities in initiating and guiding development, and aspiring to empower people to be able to meet their own needs in ways that are ecologically and socially sustainable. Community development requires devolution of power over resources and economic decision making to the community (Durning, 1989; Wuyts *et al.*, 1992; Colchester, 1994); it is the community that determines the direction, type and scale of development.

Although the most prominent examples of the bottom-up form of social mobilization towards sustainability are found in developing countries, often born of necessity and a pre-occupation with survival (Ekins, 1992; Ghai, 1994; Pye-Smith *et al.*, 1994), this form can be found in the developed world, too. Frequently, local environmental issues have sparked concern and action by citizens, neighbourhoods and non-governmental organizations. Indeed, much of the environment movement had its roots in local issues which also had much broader relevance and wider repercussions (Parkin, 1989).

Although social mobilization, as described here, is not a government approach to implementing sustainability, its importance has been recognized by governments. Sometimes, social mobilization is sought and initiated by governments to invoke people's involvement in the development and implementation of sustainability policies or strategies. Based on a recognition that policies require support, action and change at the grass-roots level to be effective, this top-down form of social mobilization officially sets out to empower groups or communities to bring about sustainable practices and development. In practice, social mobilization is often a mixture of the two basic forms (often referred to as a partnerships approach), as governments tap into bottom-up initiatives to develop new policies, or when communities seek government support. The common element in this variety of forms of social mobilization processes is the involvement of people at the grass-roots (community) level.

Social mobilization may also be important, perhaps crucial, in another sense. The mobilization of popular opinion in favour of sustainability may be essential to force governments to act, perhaps to undertake institutional reforms or introduce a rational policy approach (Aplin, 1997a). Politicians need to be pressured by the electorate, or by pressure groups, to take more radical and innovative approaches. Ultimately, such social mobilization may give rise to a new national philosophy or meta-theory that has sustainability as a core component (Aplin, 1996, 1998).

Although the importance of public participation is now widely professed, even to the extent that it has become a new orthodoxy, it is practised in many different forms and to many different degrees, ranging from tokenistic exercises to genuine power sharing (Arnstein, 1969). Even if the commitment to public or community participation is genuine, it is fraught with difficulties (Amy, 1990), and has its limitations, for instance: with regard to the ability to tackle factors external to communities; to the availability of resources; and to the time and effort that can be realistically expected from people on an on-going basis. In its most generous and genuine forms, public participation may lead to participation fatigue. Devolving responsibilities to the community may also have an element of 'passing-the-buck', and divert attention from the inability or unwillingness of governments to deal with issues. It may also be inspired first and foremost by cost-cutting motives.

Although devolution or decentralization of responsibilities and power to local communities is often depicted as ecologically rational and desirable (Dryzek, 1987), it can also be problematic in terms of regional disparities in resource endowment and levels of development, local power structures, and intolerance of social diversity and alternative lifestyles. Many people now have stronger ties with functional communities than with local communities. Smaller political communities are not necessarily more democratic than larger ones, as larger, more diverse communities offer greater scope for people to raise issues of concern and provide a stronger basis for a plurality of interests and values to be represented in the political arena (Schattschneider, 1960).

Three Complementary Pathways?

The three approaches towards sustainability are based on different rationales and foci: on a recognition of the need for policy integration (Bartlett, 1990; Johnson, 1995); on the idea that changing institutions may be a more effective (but roundabout) way to influence behaviour and achieve objectives (Majone, 1989, chapter 5); and on a belief in the power of the people and the importance of practice as a guide for policies, rather than the other way around (Friedmann, 1987, pp. 225–308). Each approach is associated with, if not driven by, a different political constituency or constellation of interests. The green planning approach tends to be dominated by political and bureaucratic interests. The institutional reform approach is associated with conflicts between vested interests and/or strong advocates of market-oriented change on the one hand, and demands for a strengthening of the ecological rationality of institutional frameworks by environmental advocates on the other. The social mobilization approach (in its bottom-up form) is driven by local (social, economic and environmental) needs and citizens' aspirations.

As the three approaches towards sustainability are chosen for different reasons, and operate in different realms of governance (policy, institutional, local/practical), it is unlikely that any of these on its own will achieve sustainability. Green planning without supporting institutional reform and practice amounts to nothing more than symbolic policy. Institutional reform does not automatically produce good policies or outcomes, in spite of claims to the contrary. Local and practical action directed at achieving sustainability may be frustrated or undone by institutional obstacles and conflicting policies.

Therefore, one may be tempted to argue that these pathways are complementary. Ideally, green plans, institutional reform and social mobilization work in concert with each other. But, although we agree that that should be the case in an ideal world, it is a rare occurrence in reality. More often, different approaches towards sustainability will dominate at different times, depending on the political, economic, social and environmental conditions and developments in a country. Whether and how these three approaches towards sustainability can or will be combined depends foremost on the political, social and economic context, on the specific form given to each approach and on the extent to which their different constituencies or social bases—the people involved in their promotion and practice—engage with each other in dialogue, and succeed in designing mutually supportive approaches.

Australia's Pathway Towards Sustainability

Structure of Australian Government

The Australian pathway towards sustainability cannot be analysed without considering the federal nature of the Australian nation-state. Given the significant powers of both the states and territories on the one hand, and the Federal Government on the other, and the fact that the nature and extent of these powers have been subject to considerable confusion, debate and change (Fowler, 1993a; Doyle & Kellow, 1995, pp. 144–150), Australia's approach to sustainability needs to be seen within the resultant interplay of forces and developments. And, given its responsibilities, especially in planning, local government also has a key role to play in promoting sustainability. Australia's pathways towards sustainability, therefore, involve a complex web of changing and interacting factors at multiple levels. This analysis can only hint at some of the most important developments.

Australia, as a federation, has a three-tier system of government. Local or municipal government is, in general terms, less important than in many other nations—it certainly does not carry out the range of activities ascribed to local government in either the UK or the USA, for example. Australian local government is, however, important in environmental terms. The Australian states, on the other hand, are more important and more powerful than in many other federations (perhaps with the exception of the Canadian Provinces). They certainly assert their independence rhetorically and, at times, in practical ways and through the courts. Much heated debate has occurred over the years as to the demarcations between state and federal jurisdictions, as much in environmental matters as any others. This political uncertainty and actual and potential overlap also affect the bureaucracies and the administration of environmental regulations. Put very simply, most practical environmental management rests with the states. The Federal Government can only intervene in a limited number of ways: when foreign affairs and trade issues are involved; when international agreements are involved; in the case of federal government properties and activities; and in facilitating co-operation between states and territories (Holland, 1996; Aplin, 1998, pp. 165–179).

The International Context

Before discussing the three pathways in the Australian context, the importance of international developments in triggering Australia's sustainability efforts is

worth noting. Australia was an early leader in some fields, especially in relation to biodiversity and the associated concept of ecological sustainability at the IUCN General Assembly in 1984 (Aplin, 1998, p. 259). But such a leading role has not been always maintained. As in many other countries, sustainability has (re)appeared on the political agenda in the wake of more recent international developments. Although environmental issues had received public and government attention much earlier, it was only in the late 1980s, after the Brundtland Report was published and environmental problems with a global dimension came to the fore, that sustainability became a key concept in environmental discussions, actions and policies. The need to (be seen to) respond to international demands and pressures, spilling over into domestic concerns, has been an important factor in the efforts of governments, including Australia's, in promoting sustainability.

Green Planning in Australia

Developing strategies has been the preferred means of addressing environmental problems in Australia; since the 1980s, many national strategies have been adopted, including ones dealing with conservation, greenhouse response, waste minimization and recycling, ozone protection, drought, biological diversity and water quality (Fowler, 1993a, p. 117). In addition, many other policy statements, guidelines, codes, standards and measures have been adopted at federal and state levels, indicating the popularity of the green planning approach.

Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Strategy

Arguably, the flagship is the Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Strategy. At the national level, this has been the most comprehensive strategic effort, addressing developments in 33 sectors, as well as cross-sectoral themes. It contains commitments towards a raft of objectives, mostly of a general nature, using terms such as 'promote', 'encourage', 'review' and 'develop'. Endorsed by the Commonwealth and all state governments in 1992, it has been followed by numerous other strategies, programmes and actions, and by the incorporation of ESD principles into some sectoral legislation, notably with regard to fisheries, agricultural and veterinary chemicals, state-owned corporations and planning legislation in some state jurisdictions (Intergovernmental Committee for Ecologically Sustainable Development (ICESD), 1996).

The ESD Strategy has three core objectives:

- to enhance individual and community well-being and welfare by following a path of economic development that safeguards the welfare of future generations;
- to provide for equity within and between generations; and
- to protect biological diversity and maintain essential ecological processes and life support systems (Australia, 1992, p 8).

Its guiding principles stress integration in decision-making processes, the precautionary principle, broad community involvement and consideration of global impacts. But they also emphasize "the need to develop a strong, growing and

diversified economy", and the need to "maintain and enhance international competitiveness in an environmentally sound manner". It is also stated that "cost effective and flexible policy instruments should be adopted, such as improved valuation, pricing, and incentive mechanisms" (ibid., pp. 8–9).

At a general level, these principles reflect a recognition of the potential tension between economic and environmental values and interests. Although the notion of sustainability is commonly claimed to overcome this tension by emphasizing complementarity between economic growth and environmental protection, and although the ESD Strategy gives expression to that idea throughout, economic imperatives and the fundamental nature of the economic system appear to be taken for granted, and used as a framework within which environmental issues can be integrated, preferably in ways that confer economic benefit as much as environmental benefit.

How Successful Has the ESD Strategy Been?

As an exercise in policy formation, the ESD Strategy has only a limited degree of rationality, despite its specification of principles, objectives and means, as these do not appear to be based on a coherent analytical framework and a comprehensive, rigorous study of problems, how these are interrelated, where the nodal or pressure points among factors are located, and the relative merits of different courses of action. Rather, the Strategy's analysis is very general, more in the nature of an inventory of problems and goals, with limited suggestions about possible solutions that need to be promoted, encouraged or further explored. Little information is provided about the scale or nature of the problems, partly as a reflection of the many gaps in Australian environmental data. Nor is it clear how progress towards reducing or resolving these problems can or will be measured; although there has been considerable progress in developing environmental indicators for Australia (Alexandra *et al.*, 1998; Fairweather & Napier, 1998; Hamblin, 1998; Manton & Jasper, 1998; Pearson *et al.*, 1998; Saunders & Margules, 1998; Ward *et al.*, 1998), there has been little apparent attempt to link these back to the ESD Strategy. Therefore, in terms of its rational basis, the Strategy so far compares poorly with, for example, the Dutch National Environmental Policy Plan (Bührs, 1996).

The Strategy's limitations inevitably show up in its implementation. Although many initiatives and developments are claimed to have stemmed from it, particularly at state and local levels, these are mostly in the nature of policies, programmes or strategies, and do not provide many clues as to the extent to which objectives have been achieved and problems mitigated or resolved. Given the relative lack of specific objectives, targets, time-frames and indicators, evaluating progress has been difficult, and even more open to selective and subjective assessment than is inevitable with any sustainability programme. The ESD Steering Committee, in its first assessment of progress towards implementation, noted these difficulties (ESD Steering Committee 1993, p. 6). Five years later, these weaknesses were also identified by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its report on Australia's environmental performance (OECD, 1998). What is more, many of the 'successes' claimed were implemented before the Strategy was adopted, or were put in place for other, often economic, reasons.

Lack of transparency, specificity and co-ordination in implementation has led

various commentators to conclude that the ESD process is "dead" or "moribund" and "floundering" (Doyle & Kellow, 1995, pp. 149–150; Aplin, 1998, p. 147; Hamilton, pers. comm.). Various reasons have been put forward for the Strategy's apparent demise, including a change in political leadership and economic climate, bureaucratic jealousies, lack of support by some players and systematic obstacles placed in its path (Dovers, 1997, pp. 9–10). Above all, the all-pervading presence of economic rationalism, with its very strong emphasis on, and faith in, neo-classical economics and free markets, in Australian public life makes progress extremely difficult (Aplin, 1997a).

So it seems that the ESD Strategy is heading for a similar fate to that of the National Conservation Strategy for Australia (NCSA), developed in response to a call in the World Conservation Strategy for governments to develop national strategies. Despite Australia's leadership in 1984 (see above), the NCSA soon faded and achieved little, lacking implementation plans, enforcement, resourcing or institutional support. It was soon forgotten (Dovers & Williams, 1997, pp. 5). Although the NCSA came about after considerable public discussion, it was also met with scepticism by the environmental movement, because of a lack of specific commitments or obligations.

However, despite its apparent demise as a comprehensive and co-ordinated form of rational sustainability policy, the ESD Strategy may have led, and might still lead, to tangible results via hundreds of more specific policies and programmes introduced in its wake at federal, state and local levels. Several of these seem promising, in the sense that they appear to enjoy a high level of commitment and support (Diesendorf & Hamilton, 1997, pp. 296–8). In as much as these developments can be attributed to the ESD process, and/or can be seen as its metamorphosis into more practical forms, the ESD process in Australia is far from dead. It was also interesting recently to hear a senior figure in the Australian mining industry say that "we will undoubtedly hear a lot more of ESD" (Dr Ian Gould, at the Australian National Heritage Convention, Canberra, August 1998). But in the absence of sufficient information about performance and results, a judgement of these programmes as rational policy efforts directed at achieving specified objectives must be tentative and incomplete.

Given the enormous difficulties inherent in the development of sustainability policy (Dovers, 1996, 1997), it is perhaps not surprising that the ESD Strategy does not live up to the demands of green planning, especially in the context of the complexities of Australia's federal system of government. Within these constitutional constraints, it is not realistic, and arguably often not desirable, for the Federal Government to formulate specific objectives and targets for policy areas under the control of the states and territories—often, it is simply legally and constitutionally impossible for it to do so. Therefore, one cannot expect the Federal Government to adopt and implement the same kind of plan as adopted by the Dutch. The main role and significance of the ESD Strategy, then, may lie in the catalytic effect it has on the development of more substantive policies and actions by states, territories and local governments. But that does not preclude scope for enhancement of the Federal Government's performance with regard to the development of a more co-ordinated, substantive sustainability policy. As many environmental issues require an integrated approach from local to global levels, national governments have a vital role to play in ensuring that local and state efforts meet objectives and obligations agreed on at national and international levels. Federal Government environmental policies appear to have

regressed in the late 1990s, however, and rational policy certainly seems to focus on economic rationalism, much more than on ecological rationality (Aplin, 1997a).

Both in its catalytic value and potential, and as a form of rational sustainability policy at the national level, the ESD Strategy has unfulfilled promise. It may be an important step in the long and difficult process of political, bureaucratic and societal struggle, change and learning posed by the environment as a policy problem (Caldwell, 1963). And its significance may go beyond the realm of rational or substantive policy change, and extend into the other two approaches towards sustainability.

Australian Institutional Reform

Institutional reform as a pathway towards sustainability has been much less relied on in Australia than in some other countries, including New Zealand. Although institutional change has occurred, and important reforms are about to be introduced, these changes seem to be driven more by the political dynamics of Australia's federal system of government than by a desire to redesign the institutional framework on the basis of challenges inherent in sustainability. Furthermore, there is heated debate in mid-1998 as to whether the latest mooted institutional changes at the federal level will be beneficial or detrimental to the environment, and promote or hinder moves towards sustainability.

Federal Institutional Reforms

Some reforms, such as the many changes to the name and location of Australia's federal environmental agency, were more an indication of the extent to which environmental issues were regarded as of residual political importance, than a reflection of efforts to boost the capacity for policy development and co-ordination.[4] Having been part of a frequently reshaped department of neglected portfolios has not done much good for the environment agency's institutional capacity, despite its many enthusiastic and well-meaning staff. Small, understaffed and under-resourced compared to most other departments, and responsible to Ministers for the Environment who have displayed variable environmental commitment, and have had a low ranking in Cabinet, environmental advocacy at the federal level has often lacked strength.

The federal system of government, and the fact that the states and territories fiercely guard their powers and responsibilities in the environment area, give rise to many obstacles to the development of environmental policy. Arguably, the Federal Government has more environmental powers than it has been willing to use in recent years (see earlier comments on Australia's political system) and has generally relied on the co-operation of the states and territories. Labour Federal Governments, however, did take a more assertive role during the 1970s and early 1980s (Fowler, 1993a), much to the concern of the states, and at the cost of considerable conflict and tension in federal–state relations. The Federal Government's growing interventionism was based on a co-ordinate view of Australian federalism, according to which the Federal Government has foremost responsibility in ensuring policy co-ordination (Doyle & Kellow, 1995, pp. 144–150). This earlier period of greater federal involvement was accompanied by legal arguments and court decisions supporting a greater federal

role than the present Coalition and immediately previous Labour Governments have taken.

In the early 1990s under the Hawke Labour Government, federal–state relations took a significant turn towards a more co-operative relationship based on a concurrent interpretation of Australian federalism, according to which both levels of government share responsibility for environmental matters in a non-hierarchical way (ibid., pp. 144–150). Prime Minister Hawke's New Partnership initiative in 1991 was a hallmark in the development towards what has been labelled New Federalism, whereby federal powers are devolved towards the states in recognition of the subsidiarity principle (so well known in the European Union), which implies that responsibilities and powers should be assigned to the lowest level of government where they can be managed adequately (Fowler, 1993a, pp. 128–129).

The trend towards a more co-operative approach and the New Federalism was formalized in 1992 with the signing of the *Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment (IGAE)* (Australia, 1992b). According to Fowler (1993a, pp. 123), this was primarily a state-driven agreement, setting out to assign even greater decision-making powers to the states. The agreement, concluded behind closed doors, was not subjected to public discussion or comment (ibid., p. 124).

As the IGAE did not have a statutory basis, it did not imply or lead to a formal devolution of further environmental powers to the states, but most of the real power already lay with them at any rate. On the other hand, the establishment of a National Environmental Protection Council (NEPC) in 1995, another element of the IGAE, did not lead to a significant strengthening of the powers of the Federal Government with regard to setting environmental standards. It has been noted that the NEPC is essentially tokenistic in nature, as effective mechanisms to ensure the implementation of National Environmental Protection Measures are lacking. Essentially, the NEPC is just another Ministerial Council where decision making is based on mutual agreement between the Federal Government and the states and territories (Fowler, 1996).

Earlier, in 1989, the Federal Government had established the Resource Assessment Commission (RAC) with significant staff support and financial resources, in an attempt to defuse rising conflict between development and environmental interests, in society as well as within the government. The concept of sustainability played a significant role in the RAC's efforts to bridge the gap between these often conflicting interests. It took an innovative approach to its job, notably in the use of valuation techniques, but was not very successful in defusing conflict and antagonized the Government and mining interests with one of its reports. To the regret of some analysts, who saw the Commission as a significant element in strengthening environmental institutional capacity at the federal level, its funding was discontinued and it effectively ceased to exist in 1993 under a Federal Labour Government (Papadakis, 1993, pp. 124–126; Diesendorf & Hamilton, 1997, pp. 299–300; Dovers, 1997, p. 14).

The Murray–Darling Basin Commission is the most effective example of practical Commonwealth–State co-operation in the environmental area. Australia's most important river basin, the Murray–Darling Basin, has been planned on a catchment-wide basis with varying degrees of success since early this century, but for much of this time water quantity and its apportionment between states were the overriding concerns. To these, at the insistence of South Australia, was added water quality. In 1988, however, the Murray–Darling Basin

Commission was formed and the functions broadened to include many different aspects, giving true total catchment management through the Commission's Natural Resources Management Strategy. The Commission has much more to offer in environmental terms than its predecessor, the River Murray Commission (Doyle & Kellow, 1995, chapter 10)

The ESD Strategy also contained a range of recommendations with regard to institutional change to strengthen the capacity for its implementation, such as the establishment of Commonwealth and state Sustainable Development Committees of Cabinets, and a review "to identify relevant agencies and ensure that ESD principles are incorporated into their charters and corporate plans" (Australia, 1992a, p. 67). However, most of these recommendations were in the nature of proposing further study or review, and few have been implemented, the establishment of the NEPC in 1995 (see above) being one of the exceptions. The principal mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the ESD Strategy, the Greenhouse Response Strategy and the IGAE, is the Intergovernmental Committee for ESD (ICESD) which replaced the ESD and Greenhouse Response Steering Committees in 1994, and is responsible for reporting on progress on implementation of the Strategies and the Agreement. So far, the Committee has produced one report (in 1996—the ESD Steering Committee produced an earlier one in 1993) (ESD Steering Committee, 1993; ICESD, 1996) but otherwise does not appear to play a very active role in implementation, although it may organize round-table conferences and consultative meetings, and establish subcommittees.

The National Heritage Trust was an election promise of the Liberal-National Coalition in the leadup to the 1996 federal elections. While it did promise funds for environmental programmes, the cynical view of many was that it took the place of more meaningful commitments, and that it was largely a sweetener to gain support for the partial sale of Telstra, the public telecommunications company. While the establishment of the A$1.25 billion Trust following the election of the Coalition Government had considerable potential to promote sustainability, the outcomes have so far been disappointing, and the way in which the funds have been distributed has drawn much criticism. Despite this innovation, the capacity for the Federal Government to advance sustainability policy in a co-ordinated manner remains weak, and subject to fluctuations in political climate and preference.

Overall, at the federal level, the extent of institutional reform directed at the promotion of sustainability has been limited. The principal mechanisms for the formation and implementation of national-level sustainability policy remain Cabinet, and Ministerial Councils and their advisory groups, where federal and state positions and interests are carefully balanced (Fowler, 1993a; Doyle & Kellow, 1995, pp. 153–156).

State and Local Government Initiatives

Possibly more significant institutional change directed at advancing sustainability occurs at state level, as in South Australia, where an Environment and Natural Resources Cabinet Committee was established, and in Tasmania, where a Sustainable Development Advisory Council has been established. South Australia has also introduced a comprehensive single enactment (replacing almost all pre-existing environment protection legislation) to be administered by a new

Environment Protection Agency (Fowler, 1993b, p. 159) and has created a Natural Resources Council with community representation that provides advice to the Government on policies, legislation and issues regarding resources (ICESD, 1996, p. 120). Various other states have also incorporated ESD principles into their environment, planning or sustainable development policies while, at the metropolitan level, a more comprehensive and integrated approach towards environmental planning is developing (Dawkins *et al.*, 1994).

One field in which there has been considerable institutional change at state and local levels is that of total catchment management (TCM). It has been widely acknowledged that it makes sense to consider the intricate web of interactions within a drainage basin and to attempt to plan holistically, even though catchment boundaries are almost always at odds with artificially imposed administrative boundaries. New South Wales has introduced Total Catchment Management Committees backed by state legislation, and other states have similar bodies. Some environmentalists feel that catchment or bioregional boundaries should replace the present administrative boundaries. Such a change occurred in New Zealand (Bührs & Bartlett, 1993, pp. 119–121) and in Australia it is also supported by bureaucrats in Victoria, following the successful introduction of that state's Catchment Management Authorities.

However, how effective these institutional changes and mechanisms at the state level are in advancing sustainability is, as yet, unknown. As noted by Doyle and Kellow, the long-standing focus on the federal level of government for advancing environmental values and interests, and the dominance of the co-ordinate view of its role, have led to the long-time neglect of institution building for dealing with environmental conflict and strengthening environmental interests at the state level, and to the frequent denial of access by legitimate environmental interests to policy communities (Doyle & Kellow, 1995, pp. 144–150). At the metropolitan level, effective mechanisms for public participation in decision making also still need to be developed (Dawkins *et al.*, 1994, pp. 195–196).

But, at least in a formal sense, the capacity of states to deal with environmental issues has grown, as has their willingness to engage in the development of ESD strategies. ESD thinking, as measured by the adoption of the view that economic development and environmental protection need not be in conflict, appears to have permeated state government processes. None the less, more than half of the recommendations contained in the ESD Strategy still await implementation at the state level: "the substance continues to fall short of the rhetoric" (Lothian, 1997). And to what extent these developments have led, or are leading, towards better environmental outcomes also largely remains unknown. The rapid growth of state of the environment reporting at federal, state and local levels since 1987 (now compulsory for local authorities in New South Wales, at least) has, however, been a major step forward, establishing a much better knowledge base with which to make decisions and against which to gauge progress. Such reporting will assist in arriving at an answer to the crucial question raised above.

Recent and Future Developments

For sustainability to become an entrenched basis for policy development in Australia, at the federal and state levels, more extensive and significant institu-

tional reform is required. Environmental interests still do not have a strong presence within the existing institutional framework and decision-making processes, as economic voices are almost universally more strongly represented within the bureaucracy and on committees and advisory boards. The environment departments at all levels of government have to fight to be heard, and certainly do not normally receive the same attentive reception as do the economically based ones. Christoff (1994, p. 366) notes that "institutional reforms adequate to meet ecological needs have been minimal". Environmental capacity along a range of modalities needs strengthening, for instance: with respect to environmental monitoring and reporting; the development of policy expertise; horizontal and vertical policy co-ordination and integration; the position and role of environmental agencies; and public participation. Many suggestions for institutional reform have been put forward, among which are included the resurrection of the RAC, the establishment of ESD Office in Prime Minister's and Premiers' departments, the creation of a Ministerial Council for ESD, an ESD research council, and a Commissioner for ESD (Dovers, 1997, pp. 12–16).

In February 1998, the Minister for the Environment, Robert Hill, released a consultation paper on a reform of Commonwealth environmental legislation (Department of the Environment (DoE), 1998). The proposed reform, the greatest and most comprehensive shake-up of environmental legislation in recent times, and affecting over 20 Commonwealth statutes, foresees the introduction of three new acts: an Environment Protection Act; a Biodiversity Conservation Act; and new heritage legislation (to be introduced later). The reason advanced for the proposed legislation is that there are deficiencies in existing legislation, developed in an *ad hoc*, piecemeal fashion. It is argued that this legislation largely fails to recognize and implement the principles of ESD, that it does not equip the Commonwealth to address "current and emerging environmental issues", and that it "has not been amended to reflect best practice" (ibid., p. 2). It is also argued that most states now have relatively comprehensive environmental law regimes; that existing arrangements lead to unnecessary delay, duplication and uncertainty; and that there is a need to bring the legislation in line with "an appropriate role for the Commonwealth in environmental matters" (ibid.).

A key objective of the environmental law reform is to "remove the existing indirect triggers and to replace them with triggers based on national environmental significance" (ibid., p. 4). It is stated that the Commonwealth's role "should be focused on matters of national environmental significance" (ibid., p. 3), although this has, in fact, always been the case. What is of national environmental significance, however, is defined rather narrowly under the proposal, mainly encompassing certain conservation issues, nuclear activities, and the marine and coastal environment (ibid., p. 4).

Other key elements in the proposed legislation are the formalization of the accreditation mechanism, involving a greater reliance on state processes and, in some cases, state decisions (for example, decisions under agreed management plans), the improvement of efficiency and timeliness of the development approvals processes, the rationalization of the existing arrangements for heritage protection, and increased compliance (ibid.). There is little new here, as all of these elements appeared in the IGAE (Australia, 1992b); the new feature seems to be an even greater desire to limit the ability of the Federal Government to intervene in environmental decisions of the states and territories.

Whether, and if so to what extent, the proposals imply a strengthening of the

institutional framework for the promotion of sustainability is debatable. Environmental groups have attacked the proposals as "[Prime Minister] Howard's plan to trash environmental laws" (Davis, 1998). They come at a time when relations between the environmental movement and the Government are already strained because of various proposed developments, such as the Jabiluka uranium mine, which is practically, if not legally, within the World Heritage listed Kakadu National Park;[5] and the Hinchinbrook marina and resort development on the central Queensland coast, which has the potential to damage important marine environments and to compromise sections of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, another World Heritage area (Hogarth, 1998). Environmentalists fear that the formal devolution of even greater environmental powers to the states, which are locked into a competitive struggle for development, will undermine the Federal Government's ability to put a halt to environmentally damaging development, and even compromise hard-won environmental gains. The proposals are seen as a further retreat by the Federal Government from its environmental responsibilities (New South Wale Environmental Defender's Office, 1998). They can be interpreted as reflecting a desire on the part of the present Government to formally abdicate the powers that it now possesses but is reluctant to use, as indicated by its handling of the Jabiluka and Hinchinbrook issues.

But perhaps the most important point about the proposed reforms is that they have not come about as a result of public debate. Although they are contained in a Consultation Paper (DoE, 1998), the time for effective public consultation and debate has been extraordinarily limited (less than a month), given their acknowledged importance. Apparently, drafting legislation to introduce them started soon after the consultation paper was released, which suggests that the extent or nature of public comment on the proposals was not given much importance. Not surprisingly, the consultation process has been referred to as a "sham" (New South Wales Environmental Defender's Office, 1998). The proposed reforms appear to have their source in a new Agreement on the Environment concluded by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in November 1997, an agreement not made publicly available, let alone subject to public debate. Despite rhetoric about the importance of public participation in government statements and in the proposed legislation, these events illustrate that there is still a long way to go for federal environmental policy development to become truly participatory, rather than merely tokenistic.

Even though the devolution of environmental powers and responsibilities to states and local government may make sense environmentally, the concerns of environmentalists about the proposed reforms are well founded. Apart from formalizing ESD principles in legislation, there is little if anything in the proposals that amounts to a strengthening of institutional environmental capacity along the lines suggested above. As ESD principles are very much open to interpretation, there is no guarantee that a strong rather than weak notion of sustainability will prevail at the state level. On their own, the proposed reforms will not provide a more level playing field between economic and environmental interests, or even guarantee minimum standards of environmental protection.

Another intensely controversial area of late-1990s institutional reform in Australia involves the National Competition Policy. This policy aims at freeing up markets and removing as many impediments to free competition as possible. In practical terms, it has involved much privatization of formerly public utilities,

such as electricity generation in Victoria and water supply in South Australia, with many other examples likely to follow in the near future. Electricity and water charges have, in some cases, fallen but such price reductions may be sending the wrong signal to consumers from an environmental and sustainability perspective. And there are already indications that environmental performance has deteriorated. In other words, such reforms, clearly in line with the economic rationalist approach to policy formation, may well be acting against the best interests of the environment and sustainability.

These issues highlight the political nature of institutional reform as a pathway towards sustainability, as such reform almost inevitably involves a reallocation of power and affects vested interests. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is little political enthusiasm for institutional reform perceived as a threat to dominant interests. Whether it is easier to introduce institutional reform directed at promoting sustainability at the federal rather than state level depends on the relative strength of political forces, and relevant opportunity structures. Although the federal arena, because of its scale and greater plurality of interests, may offer less scope for the mobilization of bias towards economic interests (Schattschneider, 1960), this is no guarantee that a strategy of institutional reform for promoting sustainability will be most successful and effective at that level. In the late 1990s, all Australian governments, with the partial exception of that of New South Wales, are biased towards economic interests, but none more than the Federal Coalition Government. Although this discussion has centred on the federal level, it is vital to remember, given Australia's federal system of government, that institutional reform at the state level cannot be ignored.

Social Mobilization in Australia

Social mobilization as a pathway towards sustainability can take a variety of forms: bottom-up; top-down; and mixtures of the two. The common element is a recognition of the importance of grass-roots activity by those directly affected by, or responsible for, the perceived problems. Social mobilization involves people (stakeholders) taking ownership of the problems and relying, as much as possible, on their own motivation, ingenuity and resources to address them. It can also involve people adopting particular attitudes and becoming politically active to bring about change in the national philosophy and, more practically, through the ballot box and many less-direct forms of influence on policy making and institutional reform (Aplin, 1996). The main concern here, however, is with the former type of social mobilization.

Landcare

Australia is widely regarded as a leader in applying new policy approaches, especially community-based approaches (Dovers & Williams, 1997) of which the Landcare movement is often seen as the most notable example. Landcare, with its roots in concerns shared by farmers and conservationists about land degradation, spread from a relatively small initiative in 1985, established with federal government support and encouragement, to a widespread movement consisting of over 4200 community-based self-help groups throughout Australia by 1998. Decentralized and enormously varied, it is not government run (although strongly supported by government) and does not conform to any institutional

pattern. Owned by a broad range of stakeholders, the Landcare approach is inclusive, participatory, holistic and focused on causes rather then symptoms. By various accounts, it appears to have been an effective means of mobilizing time, effort and monetary contributions from local people, as well as of making effective use of their shared knowledge (Roberts, 1992; Campbell & Siepen, 1994; ESD Steering Committee, 1995).

Recognizing the movement's importance, the Federal Government provided limited financial assistance to many, although not all, Landcare groups; declared the 1990s the Decade of Landcare; started a National Landcare programme, and established a National Landcare Advisory Committee. Increasingly, governments at the federal and state levels have become partners in the movements. In 1994, the Landcare Plan was reviewed, a shift towards a whole systems approach noted, and the need for "credible and specific performance indicators" highlighted (ESD Steering Committee, 1995). Thus, although still having a very strong community component, the Landcare movement appears to have evolved into a mixed form of mobilization.

Other Community-based Programmes

The partnership approach used in Landcare has become a basis for a range of other community-based or community-oriented programmes. In some cases, the initiative has come from government, but in others it has come from local communities or interest groups, such as farmers. They can thus sometimes be characterized as top-down forms of social mobilization, and at other times as bottom-up forms. The top-down initiative are more vulnerable than bottom-up ones to the withdrawal of government funding and support (Martin & Woodhill, 1995; Dovers & Williams, 1997). These programmes frequently have been successful in invoking public support, commitment and activity on an on-going basis. How effective they have been in terms of outcomes in less clear.

Although these initiatives may provide some ground for the claim that Australia is a leader in the development of forms of social mobilization as a pathway towards sustainability, there is insufficient basis for arguing that Australian governments have adopted this as their main approach at the federal and state levels. In fact, there seems to be fear on the part of at least some governments and some arms of their bureaucracies of losing control over the policy process by allowing too much local involvement. This 'guarding the turf' attitude can stifle grass-roots initiatives, dampening local enthusiasm. It appears that the importance of social mobilization still is not sufficiently recognized in Australia.

Social Mobilization and the National Ecologically Sustainable Development Strategy Process

The process that led to adoption of the National ESD Strategy in 1992 has often been described as broadly participatory, as a wide range of representatives from industries, government, and environmental and community groups were involved. However, for a variety of reasons, it seems unjustified to depict it as a strong form of social mobilization.

Initiated in 1990 by the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, the process involved extensive discussions over a period of nearly a year (1991) in nine working

groups which included representatives from many sectors, relevant government departments and non-governmental organizations. There was also a working group on the development of a climate change response strategy. The process was driven by a desire to engage in dialogue and achieve consensus (Throsby, pers. comm.) and, despite the parties often having quite different positions, and an inability to achieve consensus on some issues, many participants were apparently surprised by the extent of agreement reached (Diesendorf, 1988 pers. comm.). Altogether, more than 500 recommendations were put forward in the final reports of the working groups (Diesendorf & Hamilton, 1997, p. 292). The Intergovernmental ESD Steering Committee then considered the recommendations, published a Draft Strategy in mid-1992, allowing time for submissions and comments from the public before the final Strategy document was published in December 1992.

The consultative process that preceded the adoption of the ESD Strategy might suggest that it was more in the nature of a bottom-up than a top-down approach. However, various qualifications need to be made to that interpretation. Firstly, the Federal Government formulated the framework and principles on the basis of which the discussions took place (Australia, 1990). Secondly, participation in the process was carefully controlled from above, to the extent that bureaucratic and industrial interests had much heavier representation than community and environmental groups. For this reason, some environmental groups chose not to participate, or withdrew from the process (Diesendorf & Hamilton, 1997, pp. 286–288). Thirdly, the consultation occurred mostly behind closed doors. Public participation was limited to a few public meetings organized towards the end, too late for many recommendations to be incorporated. It has been argued that dissenting views were effectively excluded from the process (Beder, 1993, pp. xiv–xv, 287). Finally, many of the recommendations put forward were watered down in the final document to accommodate those industries and bureaucrats unhappy with the recommendations of the working groups (Fowler, 1993a; Diesendorf & Hamilton, 1997, pp. 293–295).

Although the process may have been an attempt to reconcile what were perceived to be increasingly damaging conflicts between development interests and environmentalists, in line with Prime Minister Bob Hawke's corporatist governing style, it was carefully managed and orchestrated from the top (Eckersley, 1996, pp. 98–99). The involvement of a large number of high-level bureaucrats suggests that there was a concern to 'keep things on the rails' and avoid ideas or suggestions perceived as potentially damaging to economic growth or business interests. So, although the process may have been a worthwhile learning experience in interest-accommodation for those involved, it was definitely not a broad, bottom-up exercise in participatory policy making and a very limited, top-down form of social mobilization.

As a result of this, it is not surprising that the ownership of the ESD Strategy was seen to lie in relatively few hands, in particular in those of people within the Government and bureaucracy who were involved in giving it its final shape. The watering down of many recommendations in the final Strategy alienated environmental groups, and even some industries, that had participated, thus damaging their identification with it. Following its adoption, the involvement of high-level government officials dropped off, as responsibility for implementation was largely passed to lower-ranking officials at the federal and state levels. And although the ESD process had a relatively high profile in the media in 1991–92,

it virtually disappeared from media and public attention after the Strategy was adopted, to the extent that only one year later few people still knew what ESD stood for (Papadakis, 1996, p. 189).

Australian Social Mobilization and the Future

Possibly, within local communities and at the local government level, social mobilization as a pathway towards sustainability is becoming an increasingly important phenomenon in Australia, as in many other countries (Pye-Smith *et al.*, 1994). The level of interest, commitment and activity with regard to environmental issues at that level seems to be genuine and growing, and often results in concrete improvements in environmental quality. In the late 1990s, as the level of political commitment of the National-Liberal Federal Government towards the enviroment is perceived by many as, at best, low and, at worst, negative, and as state governments display variable environmental performances and are locked into competition for economic growth, environmental action at the community and local government level, along with other bottom-up forms of social mobilization (such as action-centered networks) may be seen as offering the greatest scope and hope for environmental improvements (Eckersley, 1996, p. 105). For that reason, it is receiving increased attention and support from environmental groups and researchers (Diesendorf, 1998, pers. comm.).

Conclusion

With the rise to political prominence of the concept of sustainability, governments have followed different courses with regard to its translation into their policies, institution and practices. Given that the term is open to many different interpretations, and perhaps should be characterized more as a discourse than a definable concept (Dryzek, 1997, p. 125), it is not surprising that its introduction has led to the development of different approaches by governments and communities, in line with their political-economic, socio-cultural and environmental systems, histories, traditions and conditions. Despite the diversity of approaches, however, some common themes or elements can be idenfitied: the need for demonstrable environmental improvements or outcomes; the need for the discourse of sustainability to be accommodated institutionally; and the need for sustainability to be translated into action and changing practices. These three challenges have been taken up to different degrees, and in different ways and combinations, by people and governments in various countries, reflected in the differential emphasis given to green planning, institutional reform and social mobilization. In other words, countries and governments can be seen to follow different pathways towards sustainability.

In the case of Australia, it appears that governments have relied most on a green planning (rational policy) approach, as reflected in the adoption of an impressive array of strategies at the federal and state levels. Institutional reform has been used much less as a deliberate means towards strengthening sustainability and its principal advocates within and outside government. Social mobilization has emerged in some sectors (in particular, land management) as a significant approach, and has been selectively tapped into by governments. Social mobilization also looks set to become more important at local government level, in part because of the perceived weakness of government commitment

towards the environment at higher levels, and in part because of growing environment problems and awareness at the local level. Social mobilization in another form—people mobilized as a social movement that can put pressure on governments through the ballot box and by other means—has varied in strength and influence over recent years, but may ultimately be the only means of achieving real movement, on the part of government, towards sustainability.

One reason for dominance of the rational policy approach in Australia, particularly at the federal level, may lie in the political and legal complexities associated with a federal system of government. This makes institutional reform difficult to achieve, given the potential implications for the relations of power within and between levels of government. As states and territories strongly guard their environmental powers and have become even more assertive, institutional reform directed at strengthening sustainability advocacy at the federal level, by itself, does not seem a viable option. But, for the same reason, the green planning approach pursued at the federal level is unlikely to go beyond the formulation of general goals and principles, as reflected in many of the national strategies adopted. Rather, the adoption of a combination of a more symbolic version of green planning, a form of institutional reform that accommodates rather than antagonizes the interests and aspirations of the state, and a mixed (partnership) mode of social mobilization appears to be, for Australia, a more realistic pathway, offering the least resistance.

Whether this combination will prove to be a pathway towards sustainability is doubtful, however. As pointed out in this paper, important weaknesses remain in Australia's green planning efforts and institutional framework. Although the social mobilization approach may become more significant, it needs to be supported by a stronger performance in green planning at all levels of government, and by more incisive institutional reform (to create a more level playing field between economic and environmental interests) to succeed. The path of least resistance may be politically attractive, but is not necessarily effective or adequate in terms of meeting the challenges associated with the concept or discourse of sustainability

One of the implications that can be drawn from this analysis is that significant advances in sustainability are unlikely to be achieved if the political obstacles to institutional change are not overcome. One possibility is to promote the introduction or strengthening of framework legislation at the federal level that requires states to: undertake environmental monitoring and reporting on an on-going basis; formulate and implement, in open and participatory ways, comprehensive and integrated sustainability strategies consistent with, but much more specific than, the National ESD Strategy; and establish independent agencies to audit environmental performance. Such reforms would not change the balance of power between state and federal governments, but make environmental performance at the state level more transparent. There are good grounds for making such requirements a precondition for the devolution of environmental responsibilities and powers that both state and federal governments desire. Without such legal requirements, devolution amounts to not much more than environmental gambling. Ultimately, however, this path can only be taken with the co-operation of the states and territories. Perhaps even more fundamentally, the electorate has to want it to happen.

If, as we would argue, the advancement of sustainability in more than a symbolic or marginal way requires a sharpening of the green planning

approach, a strengthening of sustainability advocacy within the institutional framework, and the emergence and cultivation of stronger forms of social mobilization, then Australia, like other countries, still has a long road ahead. What will happen depends to a large extent on the evolution of political-economic, socio-cultural and environmental conditions in Australia (but in interaction with developments beyond its borders) and the extent to which these allow, or even push, governments to undertake bolder steps in institutional reform and the formulation and implementation of sharper rational policies. Much also depends on whether the perceived growth in bottom-up social mobilization persists, and whether it gains a level and strength sufficient to bring about institutional and policy change, perhaps even of a paradigmatic nature.

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Notes

1. In the developed world, green plans mostly originate from within the sphere of national government (environment ministers, environment agencies) whereas their initiation and production in developing countries is 'assisted' by international organizations. Falloux & Talbot (1993) argue that the introduction of National Environmental Action Plans (NEAPs) in Africa has been by genuine national initiative, but in fact the World Bank has played a major role in the promotion of such plans since 1987, and they became a precondition for obtaining loans from the organization from 1991 (Carew-Reid *et al.*, 1994, p. 41).
2. The sustainable management of natural resources was formulated as the sole objective of this landmark legislation, adopted in 1991 after a major review process, that integrates all major previously existing environmental statutes and is sometimes referred to as New Zealand's environmental constitution (see Bührs & Bartlett, 1993).
3. This Office was established in 1995 by an amendment to the Auditor General Act to, in particular, report to Parliament on the extent to which government departments are implementing sustainable development strategies that (formally) their ministers are required to produce and update every three years (CESD, 1998). It should be noted, however, that in the official mandate of the Commissioner, the term 'advocate' is not mentioned.
4. Since the first central environmental agency (the Department of Environment, Aborigines and the Arts) was set up in May 1971, it has gone through eight reorganizations or 'recombinations' (Doyle & Kellow, 1995, p. 153).
5. In late 1998, the relevant UNESCO committee seriously considered placing Kakadu on the list of World Heritage areas in danger, because of the Australian Government's approval for the Jabiluka proposal, and following strong representation by both Aboriginal and environmental groups. A decision has been deferred until mid-1999, but the Australian Government has been asked to halt further mine development work in the meantime.

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