

TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

c David Woolfson, 1996

The creation of an empowering vision is a crucial step in moving humankind toward a sustainable future. This is a major challenge before us as we approach a new Century and Millennium.

To address this challenge we first need to consider the concept of vision. It is not an easy task. Corporations seem to know what "vision" is as they constantly refer to it in their advertising campaigns. Politicians also often talk about "vision" and appear to understand what it means but I'm not so sure that they do. It also seems that more people are talking about the need for vision today than ever before.

Generally, we all appreciate that vision is a very important and necessary element in creating a better future but it is really not very well understood. One thing is certain, vision is a major component of true leadership. But what is it and how can it be created?

Vision is often best defined by its absence. It is also described by the need for it. The first recorded reference to vision is found in the Bible with the often quoted statement; "Without vision the people perish". It certainly seems to be an essential component of a successful society.

If it is so important why is it so hard to define, after all the Bible has been around for thousands of years? My Webster's Dictionary doesn't help much. It states that vision is "a vivid picture created by the imagination" and is "unusual wisdom in foreseeing what is going to happen". It also describes a visionary as "one whose ideas or projects are impractical."

Well, we don't seem to be that much closer to a useful definition. Webster's does identify some important additional keywords, however: imagination, wisdom and foresight. I believe we can dispense with the word impractical as there is no reason why a vision has to be impractical.

In my view, imagination and the related concept of "visualization" are definitely a key element in creating a vision. Vision begins in the mind of an individual or group of individuals. It is an expression of a preferable future - not only for the particular individual or individuals but also for his or her community, whether local, national or global. Thus, there is a social component to the concept - it is a Social Vision.

A Dream is held by one but a Vision is the Dream of the one for the many. And, as it is a vision of a preferable or desired future for the many, it also expresses wisdom and foresight.

As mentioned earlier, vision also implies leadership. By communicating the vision to others in the community a visionary assumes a natural leadership role.

The final element is implied - it must by definition be a positive or beneficial vision - a community or society that is clearly preferable to the one that exists today. This final element often implies two further and very important components. A vision can also be equivalent to a goal and if viewed as a goal it requires "value judgments" to be made in the determination of what is truly preferable. For a community to accept the vision offered as it's shared goal, it should agree by consensus with the values inherent in the vision. It then becomes a collective vision and can empower all who share it!

Today it is apparent that we are in a vortex of rapid change at every level of our society. Driven primarily by massive technological change our landscape is shifting dramatically. We are in effect being forced to successfully adapt to our human-created changing environment or perhaps fall into an irreversible downward spiral.

We are all well aware of the many major and distressing economic, social and environmental trends currently gaining substantial momentum; resource depletion, environmental degradation, population explosion, social conflict, joblessness, economic uncertainty, the widening gap between haves and have-nots. As each month and year pass by the options and choices available to us as communities and societies become narrower and more limited. These serious negative trends need to be contained and reversed as quickly as possible.

The essential first step in addressing this considerable challenge is the creation of shared vision and goals for both our local communities and for the emerging global society. To do so it is necessary to determine what elements should make up the appropriate vision and goals. What shared values should apply? What shared knowledge and understanding?

I believe that shared vision and goals can be successfully developed today for the first time in our collective history. My optimism for this belief is based on what my good friend Robert Muller, former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, refers to as "Our Place in Time".

We are currently the beneficiaries of millions of years of biological and social/cultural evolution - the pinnacle of advanced consciousness and intelligence in the known Universe. We have new tools and abilities that were undreamt of a

mere 50 years ago including the spectacular information and communication technologies which are linking and connecting us at an amazing rate. We have learned an incredible amount about the workings of nature at both the micro and macro levels in this century. The totality of human knowledge continues to grow exponentially.

Many old ideas and assumptions are crumbling. New ideas and approaches are forming to replace them based on our new knowledge and understandings.

Old ideas, assumptions and practices, however, are still very much with us. We thus have truly reached a crossroads in our history. We are on the verge of finally developing wisdom at a societal level. At the same time we are subject to being pushed back into an era of increasing conflict and confrontation.

Accordingly, the choices we make today will greatly impact the shape of the future for our children, grandchildren and successive generations. The challenge is thus clear and there is a great urgency to the task.

Communities around the world are today grappling with these issues and concerns. At the same time many of the components of an emerging society are becoming apparent. The citizens of Ontario and Canada have taken a global leadership role in these areas and will hopefully continue to do so.

An excellent example of Ontario's leadership is to be found in a 1995 report published by the Government of Ontario. The report is called "Ontario Beyond Tomorrow - Ideas for Building a Sustainable Society" and was prepared by The Premier's Council and The Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy. Both the Premier's Council and the Roundtable are no longer in operation and this was their final publication.

The report is very small but delivers a very big message. It is really a remarkable document representing the input of many sectors of society. It provides a superb framework for understanding the key issues of both today and tomorrow.

"Ontario Beyond Tomorrow" very simply sets out the fundamentals of a 'new society' based on a wholistic framework of sustainability which includes all three basic elements - Economy, Environment and Society. One thing we have definitely learned in the latter part of this Century is that there is a direct relationship between human activity and environmental deterioration. Our old concept of "economic growth" which assumes our ever-increasing utilization of the Earth's natural resources - minerals, water, trees, fossil fuels, fisheries etc., together with the polluting by-products of the processes required to transform these resources into goods for human consumption is plainly not sustainable in the long term.

This, however, is but a recent understanding. The term "sustainable" is a very new one in our vocabulary. The phrase "sustainable development" was first used in the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development Report in 1987 commonly referred to as the "Our Common Future" report.

This report defined Sustainable Development as "economic development which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations". This was a radically new concept in 1987 - just nine years ago. Since then, this new concept of economic development has won many converts - in government, business, institutions and local communities. Much in this direction still needs to be done, of course, as our societies are still far from sustainable based on the original definition. And even farther from sustainable based on the concepts contained in the "Ontario Beyond Tomorrow" report.

Initially, after 1987, we began to look at the relationship between the two perspectives of environment and economy and the concept of sustainable development or redefinition of growth arose from this integrated analysis. The National Roundtable on Environment and Economy, the Ontario Roundtable and others were established by governments to explore our new understanding of this really very old relationship. But something was missing. There was a third element not being included. It was rather quickly identified, though - it is the social or human element.

The Earth and it's living eco-systems, human beings, and the relationship between the two. Now we have the whole picture - the three fundamental elements of our planetary system. These three perspectives; environment, economy and society are the foundation upon which the concept of true "sustainability" is founded.

"Ontario Beyond Tomorrow" includes this whole picture. It addresses the substantial challenge of "building a sustainable society for Ontario" by stating that what is first needed is "a shared vision of what Ontarians want the future to look like, a common vision that everyone can work together to realize". The broad vision created is as follows:

"A future for Ontario, in which economic prosperity, social justice and protection of the natural environment are pursued simultaneously to secure good health and enhance well-being for all people, now and for generations to come", and they continue, "to achieve this goal we need to develop the capacity to consider the relevant economic, social and environmental issues simultaneously, in collective and individual decision-making processes."

Other crucial elements identified in the report include seeking a balance rather than competition between the three interconnected fundamentals and in the "doing" - going beyond vision to sustainable decision-making and actions.

A key recognition of the report is thus the connection and interdependence between the three fundamental perspectives of environment, economy and society and the search for balance and harmony between them at every level. This is the profound shift in thinking - a paradigm shift if you will - that is taking place in communities all over the world. As societies we can not afford to continue addressing these issues separately if we wish to achieve a sustainable future.

This "whole-systems" approach presents the "big-picture view". Wholistic or "Whole System" thinking is perhaps the most important intellectual development of the second half of this century. It is really more than a perspective - it is a new "worldview" which profoundly recognizes the inter-relatedness of the human and the natural world. Simply put, "everything is connected to everything else".

The "wholistic" view enables the actual connections, patterns and relationships within and between systems to be identified and understood. It also enables the true costs of our decisions and actions to be considered - not solely the economic costs but also the environmental and human costs. It really changes everything. It is a fundamental shift in the way we look at our world, a shift based on an increased understanding of the "way that nature and the world actually works".

There is, however, an additional factor that is critical to the successful application of this new approach to decision-making and action. It is not sufficient only to recognize the inherent relationships between environment, economy and society. Choices have to be made between competing goals, objectives and interests - both within each of the three areas and amongst them. Such choices necessarily imply that Value Judgments must be made at every level of the decision-making process. How should these choices be made? What are the values that should be universally applied?

Firstly, it is apparent that core societal values should be shared values, arrived at by a consensus of all the interested participants in a particular community or society. That being said, on the issue of a sustainable future every human being on the planet as well as all future generations are directly interested and effected. Accordingly, "sustainability" should be viewed as both an over-riding goal and an essential core societal value for us all.

Building sustainable societies that address the need for human development as well as the essential requirement for wise stewardship of the Earth is the key to a positive future. The alternative is exactly that - unsustainable in the long-term.

In my view, we can therefore make the assumption that sustainability is and will be a fundamental shared goal and value for humanity on a local, national and global basis well into the foreseeable future. As such, it is a basic component of the "social vision" for our communities heading into the 21st Century.

In a very significant new societal trend, numerous communities, organizations and groups around the world are today engaged in creating specific principles of sustainable development, sustainable communities, sustainable cities, sustainable societies based on the new found understanding of true sustainability. They, along with governments, are also engaged in implementing these principals in the design of their communities.

We are, accordingly, in the midst of a "sustainability revolution" in the designing of the future, the designing of sustainable communities. The integration and balancing of the three fundamentals of environment, economy and society as to benefits and costs must be inherent in every level of the decision-making process and applicable to all planning issues from land use to resource management to social planning. It is impossible to create sustainable communities without the prior presence of "Sustainable Planning".

It is also critical to the sustainability process that broad and specific social, environmental and economic goals be targeted by communities and societies. And, that we have the effective ability to measure success towards these goals.

The "Ontario Beyond Tomorrow" report posits some key indicators of a sustainable society. These include the Unemployment Rate, the State of Children, Adult Literacy, Family Income and Income Equality, Crime Rate and Air Quality. These and other "Quality Indicators" can be compiled on a regular basis to provide constant feedback. And, it is suggested that a Comprehensive Index be created, modeled on the United Nations' Human Development Index - to measure our collective progress towards sustainability.

It is important to note that over the past 300 years our Western Civilization has focused exclusively on economics. In the late 1960's we discovered the environment. In the 1990's we added the social or human component. The whole system is now apparent - Society, Economy, Environment.

Every societal issue should be looked at from the three different perspectives. Within each of the three perspectives there are potential benefits and costs. These must be balanced as effectively as possible. As well the broader issues of society, economy and environment must be balanced as to each issue addressed. For example, "Is the potential harm to the environment or to human health outweighed by the potential economic gain?" How great is the risk or gain?

The balancing of potential benefits and costs in any decision is certainly not a simple task. It is a very difficult but a very necessary task. The "sustainability" model enables us to address key issues while taking into account a much more complete picture of reality. It thus provides us with the appropriate task and goal. Expertise in balancing these relationships can be developed by many individuals and groups over the next number of years. It is a skill which will be highly valued by society into the future.

Communities should each be involved in creating their own particular vision of sustainability. Each community can develop its specific vision appropriate to its particular circumstances. An urban vision will differ dramatically from a rural one. A small town will have different perspectives than that of a large city. The actuality of sustainable community models throughout Ontario, Canada and the world will be necessarily diverse. Much experimentation will undoubtedly take place - some successful and others less so. Successful models may well be adapted by other communities in different parts of the world.

This experimentation has already begun. Communities are essential in the shift to sustainable development and sustainable societies and are taking leadership around the globe. Community Based Development, Community Economic Development, Community Partnerships, Community Decision Making, Sustainable Communities, Eco- Communities, Eco-Cities - these are all recent phrases that have entered our vocabulary and consciousness. Other relatively new phrases include bioregionalism, permaculture, social ecology, urban agriculture, Urban Ecological Design. It is the beginning of a huge new wave based on a new vision of the future.

The principles being applied are often the opposite of the ones just recently adhered to: compact development rather than urban sprawl, mass transit over automobiles, reduced use of resources and recycling instead of overconsumption and waste, alternate sources of energy, communities designed to encourage walking and cycling because workplaces and shopping are placed nearby housing, "wired communities" where people can easily work from home and be connected to the world. Our communities have begun an 180 degree turn in the direction of sustainability.

Specific examples of this massive shift in direction are all around. Two fairly recent major Ontario initiatives are Southern Ontario's Waterfront Regeneration Trust and the Hamilton-Wentworth Regional Task Force on Sustainable Development.

The Waterfront Regeneration Trust was established in 1992 by the Ontario Legislature to "foster the regeneration of the Lake Ontario Waterfront from

Burlington Bay to the Trent River". It's role is rather unique for a Crown Corporation. It primarily acts "as a facilitator bringing parties together, developing agreements on waterfront objectives and the means for achieving them." It's published strategy is to "ensure that waterfront activities and development contribute to ecosystem health by protecting natural and cultural heritage.... It combines environmental regeneration with investment in recreation, tourism, economic renewal and job creation and works in close collaboration with waterfront communities."

The Hamilton-Wentworth Regional Task Force on Sustainable Development was created in 1989 with the mandate" to explore, in cooperation with local citizens, the concept of sustainable development as the basis of a review of all policy initiatives." Over a period of two and a half years, 1,000 local citizens became involved in developing a community vision and strategies for its future implementation. Many successful initiatives have been implemented. An excellent model for "community partnership" was created which I shall discuss in detail shortly.

Certainly, Ontario leadership in creating sustainable communities is apparent. Canadian "sustainability" leadership at the global level is also very evident. National resources in research and education include Environment Canada, the National Roundtable on Environment and Economy, the International Institute for Sustainable Development in Winnipeg, the International Development Research Council in Ottawa, the World Secretariat of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives in Toronto - all of which are now accessible to local communities and the public on the Internet.

Our Universities are also at the forefront, with numerous programs such as the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg, the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, the School of Environmental Planning at Dalhousie, Community and Rural Planning Studies at the University of British Columbia and many others across the country.

The tangible results of this Canadian leadership are beginning to be felt in the actual lives of our citizens with the design of new types of communities and new ways of living. The proposed "Bamberton" project in Victoria, B.C. exemplifies this new "sustainable" approach. Many other such "planned sustainable communities" will appear in future.

Of course, examples of this "new urbanism" are not limited to Canada. In 1996, one of Washington D.C.'s biggest real estate development firms announced town plans for Haymount, Virginia - all homes will be within a 5 minute walk of shopping needs, sewage will be cleansed and recycled by John Todd's "living machines". All homes will come equipped with composters and bikes.

Large institutions are also beginning to change. California has often provided new trends for the future and California's Bank of America has recently called for restraint of leap-frog growth at suburban fringes, more compact building patterns and the redevelopment of existing urban areas. The rationale for its endorsement of "sustainable community" principles is that "urban sprawl has clearly created enormous costs that California can no longer afford". These costs are not measured solely in economic terms but also in social and environmental terms.

We can look at the specifics of creating "sustainable communities" in two major ways: "sustainable design" in building new communities on undeveloped land, and, "revitalizing" of existing urban sites that are vacant, underutilized or derelict. In 1996, Toronto City Council approved 15 new downtown developments totaling \$1 Billion Dollars on such sites. The City has moved forward by flexibly and creatively relaxing zoning restrictions and encouraging new uses for existing buildings. Before the changes, development in the areas was restricted to industrial use. Developers are now allowed to recycle the buildings into any other use and get approval in weeks instead of years.

The leadership of municipal governments in partnership with private developers and community groups is thus an important key for the future as is the application of the principles of sustainability at every level of the process.

The goal of building "sustainable communities" together with environmental regeneration and urban revitalization are appropriate community goals for both today and tomorrow. Each community can create its particular vision or goal in this regard. Planners have a major role to play in assisting in the creation of such vision. A multitude of sustainable communities adds up to a sustainable society. Sustainable societies add up to a sustainable world. It begins as all things begin - one at a time. In this case it is one community at a time.

How can each community begin? The Hamilton-Wentworth Task Force on Sustainable Development created a model of community partnership that is well worth consideration. Numerous "Town Hall" meetings were first held to allow residents to contribute their thoughts about the issues that needed to be addressed and about the values that should guide the process. Next, Focus Group Discussions were organized to receive input from people who were normally overlooked in the decision-making process such as those residing in emergency shelters, seniors and linguistic minorities.

"Vision Working Groups" were organized with groups of residents and assigned the task of developing a visionary direction based on the principles of sustainable development in an assigned topic area. Citizen Implementation Teams were assigned the task of developing a report identifying the decisions and actions necessary to make an assigned section of this vision statement a reality. Two "day-

long" Community Forums were then organized to give residents the chance to comment on the reports produced. Finally, a "Sustainable Community Day" was organized for the Task Force to present its final report to Regional Council and initiate the implementation stage. Other such models have been and can be developed.

Planning is definitely one of the most important elements of a successful society. It is an area, however, that has not always been our greatest strength, particularly with regard to longer-term planning. We now have new understanding and wisdom about ourselves and our world. We also have a tremendous and unique opportunity to focus this new wisdom through appropriate action over the next few years.

That opportunity is provided by the approach of the Year 2000 and the New Millennium - a "once in a thousand year" opportunity for us all. Many Millennium Projects are now underway around the world. They are as diverse as the groups and individuals behind them and many are global in scope. Millennium projects can be placed into two general categories. The first are "Celebrations and Events". The second are projects which prepare for or plan for the New Millennium and many of these have a social component.

Many other such projects can come forth in the next few years to take full advantage of the great planning opportunity presented by the new Millennium. A new role of "Millennial Planner" will shortly appear not only in the planning of millennium celebrations and events but also in the planning of appropriate millennium projects and initiatives. The development of "sustainable communities" together with environmental regeneration and urban revitalization projects are without a doubt the types of programs most appropriate to the advent of the new Millennium.

Canadians can play a global leadership role in the creation and implementation of such essential initiatives. The planning goal is clear: project completion by the end of the Year 2000. This goal provides a timeframe to the start of the new Millennium on January 1, 2001.

The milestone of the Year 2000 affords us all the ability to focus our collective energies on positive steps to a preferable future. It is a focal point that all sectors and interests in society can rally around in a shared vision and goal - to begin the 21st Century and new Millennium in an upward direction. Every individual, organization, institution, corporation and community can participate together in this great moment.

Through vision, commitment and action, our generation can point our communities and societies toward a sustainable world which will thrive long into

the future. The decisions we make today will have a much greater impact on the future than perhaps those of any previous generation. The key to our tomorrow, then, is where and how we will apply our collective energies, resources and abilities today!!

The need for appropriate vision and leadership has, accordingly, never been greater. Our communities urgently require a clear vision of a preferable future. True visionaries are required who can help their communities create and implement effective, sustainable visions and goals as we approach a new Century and Millennium. No challenge has ever been more worthy or more necessary!!