

## CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 43a

### Toward A New Sustainability

Last Thursday evening I attended a meeting in Courtenay on sustainability. Its purpose was to help implement the recommendations on sustainability laid down in local government documents a few years ago. There were a number of short presentations on a wide range of topics from a number of groups indicating the services they were providing. It was a well-organized meeting and very impressive.

But, as I was driving home, I came away with a sense that the major issue was not dealt with. The key question is: "What is sustainability in a climate changing world?" And herein lies a paradox.

#### The Paradox

The Earth scientists have noted that our existing systems, particularly our economic systems often supported by our political systems, are wreaking havoc on Earth. But the existing systems are usually accepted as "givens" especially for government departments that are guided by legislation or policies. So the question becomes, *why are we trying to sustain the current systems that are causing the problems?*

We are now in the new Anthropocene climate changing world. Failing to recognize this new reality and failing to deal with it is a bit like two guys hitting one another with sticks while standing in quicksand. Their priority for effectiveness should be, if you will excuse the expression "to drain the swamp". Or, with an analogy that will strike closer to home for some of us, it might be like going through radiation for cancer while still smoking two packs a day.

All this is not to say that folks doing the dedicated work in our community are not providing real benefits. They are. But we are all on the horns of a dilemma. How do we improve local services but, at the same time, make the transitions to new systems in a radically changing world.

#### About Effectiveness and Efficiency.

Back in my management consulting days in the Arctic, when a government department, business, or indigenous group would ask me to come in and help with their reorganization, I usually started with two questions:

"For your organization, what is effectiveness and what is efficiency? Effectiveness means *doing the right thing*. What do you want to do? Efficiency means *doing the right thing in the right way*. How do you want to do it?"

Obviously, if they are not doing the right thing in the first place they cannot be efficient. But we should have no illusions about doing this in a climate changing world. Any significant changes from what we have been doing to what we need to do can be difficult. Here is an example that shows the struggle between effectiveness and sustainability.

In the Northwest Territories both the Federal and NWT governments wanted to devolve service responsibilities to indigenous governments. But they wanted to make sure the services provided by these governments would be effective.

For the Feds and NWT effectiveness was based upon three principles: universality (serving all of the residents) equity (treating all clients alike) and fairness (treating all residents in a manner that responds to their needs.) Their approach was to hive off the services they were providing and let the indigenous groups provide them effectively.

But the reason the indigenous groups wanted complete self-government was because they were distinct groups with distinctive cultures and languages. (Gwichin, Cree, Chipewyan, Dene, Inuvialuit, Metis and other nations with eleven officially recognized languages). For them, effectiveness meant being able to assist their members and provide services in a way that responded to their own cultures and languages.

The example shows two different understandings of effectiveness. The Feds and NWT, with their three principles and “one size fits all” approach did not see culture as an essential element in service delivery. But the indigenous groups saw culture as essential. If they couldn’t adapt services to their culture there was no sense in trying to take them over. Culture was essential to service delivery and the key to effectiveness and ongoing sustainability.

### **Towards a New Sustainability**

So in our climate changing world where new cultures will develop we need a new sustainability. How do we make the transition from the old sustainability to a new sustainability?

We must begin the task of creating new kinds of living systems. In particular, as Kate Raworth has noted, we need a new and living economic system that can exist within a living Earth (see chronicle 14). This is the key to the new effectiveness.

And, we must provide alternatives and transition mechanisms. This means doing triage work on existing systems to help us make the transitions, taking what is useful and abandoning the rest. This is the key to a new efficiency.

What should we do for groups and organizations that can’t make the adjustments? As my friend Harrison Owen once said, “We must help with the grieving process.”

In conclusion, in terms of a new sustainability, we are moving into a long-term trial and error process. We must focus on effectiveness for a changing world. But one of the considerations about effectiveness must be efficiency—how can we put this into practice?

I don’t have the answer for a new sustainable future, nor do most other people. This is just my effort, to borrow an expression from Aesop, to “Bell the cat.”

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network.