

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: OFFICIAL RESPONSES

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Sustainable development was placed on the political agenda in 1987 with the publication of *Our Common Future: The Brundtland Report* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In Britain, the Government commissioned a report by Pearce *et al.* (1989) called *Blueprint for a Green Economy*. Pearce suggested ways in which the constraints could be introduced into the economic system of the United Kingdom. Later, the Government published a White Paper called *This Common Inheritance, Britain's Environmental Strategy* (Department of the Environment, 1990). While full of fine sentiment, the White Paper paid little attention to the argument developed in the Pearce Report. Consequently, no new lead was given in this policy area. The environmental movement was given a European dimension when the European Commission published its *Green Paper on the Urban Environment* (Commission for the Economic Communities, 1990).

The early 1990s in Britain saw the publication of a number of official documents addressing environmental issues. *Development Plans: A Good Practice Guide* (Department of the Environment, 1992a) has a section on Environmental Issues which attempts to show how concerns about environmental issues can be reflected in a Development Plan. It discusses: 'achieving a balance between economic growth, technological development and environmental considerations'. It does not attempt to define the point of balance, nor does it enter the thorny argument about development versus growth. The section on energy goes a little further, incorporating

some of the ideas on energy-efficient urban form that appear in *Energy Conscious Planning* (Owens, 1991), a report prepared for the Council for the Protection of Rural England, 1992 saw the publication of *Planning Pollution and Waste Management*, which formed the basis of planning guidance (Department of the Environment, 1992b), while in 1993 *Reducing Transport Emissions Through Planning* was published: this was a document prepared jointly by the Department of the Environment and the Department of Transport (1993a). The document states that:

In recognition of the problem of global warming the UK Government has signed the Climate Change Convention. This calls for measures to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to 1990 levels by 2000. If the transport sector is to contribute to this reduction, there are three mechanisms through which this could be achieved:

- (1) Through reductions in overall travel demand;
- (2) Through encouraging the use of more emissions-efficient modes of travel; and
- (3) Through changes in the emissions efficiency of transport.

Item (1) is simply advocating more energy-efficient urban form, and item (3) is also without political pain – it is the straightforward suggestion to improve transport technology. Item (2) was – and still remains – the area with the greatest potential for short-term reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This course of action, however, causes the most difficulty for a conservative Government with a prejudice in favour of the road lobby and a propensity to support a roads solution to transport problems.

Favouring public transport rather than support for the building of more roads has proved equally problematic for the present Labour Government. Item (2) in essence means the development of an efficient, cheap and effective integrated public transport system. The development of such a public transport system means the transfer of resources from the car user to those who use public transport. The transfer of resources may take two forms. First, it may mean higher costs for the motorist in terms of petrol prices, road taxes and road pricing: this will make motoring more costly. Second, the transfer of resources takes the more direct form of the development of costly public transport infrastructure at the expense of road improvements.

Competition between our political parties means that no Government, of whatever political persuasion, can afford to alienate too many voters. Most of us living in Britain own a car: we use it daily and with it we conduct a long and tender love affair. How many voters in 'Middle England' will gladly accept the undoubted pain accompanying any restriction in car use? One simple and effective way in which the car user in this country was asked to pay for the environmental damage caused by too much petrol consumption was through the mechanism of the 'price accelerator': this was introduced by the last Conservative Government in the mid-1990s as a clever procedure to increase the price of petrol annually at each budget by an amount in excess of inflation. The Labour Government of 1997 accepted the 'accelerator', but as a policy it floundered with the threatened 'petrol strike' and the blockading of petrol stations in 1999. The Conservative opposition Party denounced the 'accelerator policy' of the Government, despite having intro-

duced it during their period in office. The public anger about petrol prices threatened the Government's commanding lead in the polls, which caused a re-think of a perfectly reasonable, environmentally friendly, petrol-taxing policy. The Labour Government's declared moratorium on road building soon after coming to power in 1997 has taken a setback with recent announcements for further motorway-widening and other major road-building projects. For those who believe that it is impossible to build your way out of the present traffic chaos these announcements, along with transport plans, appear to weaken the resolve to tackle the apparently intractable problem of strategic transport. The introduction of road pricing in London however – and its apparent success – has made it more likely that this innovation will be introduced more widely throughout the country.

*A Framework for Local Sustainability* (1993) was a response by UK local government to the UK Government's first strategy for sustainable development. The report was prepared by the Local Government Management Board setting a framework for considering Local Agenda 21 for the United Kingdom: it built upon Agenda 21 signed by 178 nations (including the UK) at the United Nations Conference on Environmental Development, Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It is closer to the Brundtland report than earlier documents originating in the UK, discussing equity in these terms: 'Fairness to people now living must accompany sustainability's concern for fairness to future generations'. *A Framework for Local Sustainability* also discusses the idea of a green economy in terms close to those of the earlier Pearce report (1989): 'Economic growth is neither necessary for sustainability nor incompatible with it: there