

can democracy deliver?

JOHN BRUTON TD

The Local Politics of Global Sustainability

Thomas Prugh, Robert Constanza, and Herman Daly
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The problem tackled by this book could not be more fundamental. How best can we organise politics so that economic forces do not propel us towards environmental disaster?

The authors argue that environmentalist tactics such as obstruction and fearmongering do not amount to a strategy. The effect of individual protests wears off quickly. Consumers do not integrate lessons from them into their daily spending and waste-generating activities.

In any event, there is so much scientific uncertainty about environmental and ecological issues that neither environmentalists nor their opponents will ever disprove one another's case conclusively on technical grounds. The issue remains political.

The authors argue that sustainability is primarily a local issue, rather than global one. If everyone acted sustainably at local level, this would look after the global ecosystem. Every human act affects the environment, so every human being should develop habits that are environmentally sensitive.

The authors argue that the global ecosystem is finite and fixed, and that the economy can only grow at the expense of the ecosystem. They argue that almost all economic activity transforms high quality matter (natural products), in low quality wastes which nature must then absorb. Nature's capacity to absorb wastes is now being pushed to, and in some cases well beyond, its limits.

The authors make the very reasonable point that it would be quite impossible for 10 billion people in the world to live the lifestyle of the average American. The average American consumes five times as much grain products and sixty times as much fuel as the average Indian. It does not require much imagination to see what would happen if one billion Indians demanded

and got as much grain and fuel products as Americans already have. Americans consume 30% of the world's non-renewable resources, with only 6% of its population.

8% of the world's population has a car. Affluent societies demand more and bigger cars. What on earth would happen if 20% of the world's population had a car?

Status goods are the drivers of modern consumerism. It is not need, but comparison with peers, that makes people buy them. Needs can eventually be satisfied, but demand for status goods is literally insatiable. The authors remark, with justification, that popular environmentalism is a mile wide and an inch deep. We may make gestures to the environment, but we are unwilling to radically alter our lifestyle.

The authors claim that conventional professional politics, as in liberal democracies like Ireland and the United States, is unlikely ever to deliver the lifestyle changes needed to create a sustainable world. It is adversarial, partisan, bureaucratic, dominated by interest groups and run by an élite. Voters act like consumers. They make their voting decisions in an uninvolved way. Politically speaking, they know the price of everything and the value of nothing. As a result, neither voters nor politicians engage with long term issues like sustainability. Observing Irish politics today, it is hard to disagree with this critique.

The authors, to their credit, then attempt to come up with a solution. They argue for what they call 'Strong Democracy'. By this they mean a localised system whereby every citizen would be involved in every political decision. Town meetings, interactive electronic discussions and local referenda would be the preferred means of reaching consensus and a decision. Professional elected public representatives would see their role diminished, and much of their work done by panels of citizens selected by lot.

The authors would argue that a citizenry which was directly involved in difficult political decisions, for example, in deciding on waste disposal options, would learn, through that process, to create less waste in their own daily lives. Strong democracy would make people less selfish.

The authors, having made this reasonable argument, display a great lack of confidence in its practicality. They do not show how nations, or global organisations could be run on the basis of Strong Democracy. They admit that 'it would be ridiculous' to contemplate a citizen assembly for the whole country. They even say of their proposal 'whether it would work better than the system now in place, or work at all, is a matter of speculation'. After 123 pages, one would have expected something a bit firmer than this!

In any event, the experience of citizen's assemblies during the French revolution does not suggest that they necessarily take mature or long-sighted decisions. The experience of popular referenda in California and Switzerland shows that they can be captured by vested interests, like property owners and male voters.

My own view is that institutional solutions, like those advanced in this book, will not suffice to give us a sustainable world. Individual consumer decisions need to be directly influenced. A shift of the taxation away from income towards spending would damp down consumerism. This is

mentioned in the book, but not developed. Consumer decisions are also influenced by people's value systems. Value systems are shaped by factors outside politics - by secular public morality and by religion.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century gave man a misplaced self-confidence - a confident belief in inevitable progress, in free markets, and in the superiority of man-made science over all natural phenomena. The decline of traditional religion flowed from this.

Sustainability requires us to meet the present generation's needs without compromising the ability of future ones to meet theirs. This is a moral, not an institutional issue.

The world is facing an environmental crisis because men and women, as profit maximisers and as consumers, have lost their sense of responsibility to pass on the earth undamaged to great grandchildren. A religious sense, that puts present needs back into proportion with eternal ones, is necessary for us to feel a sense of responsibility to future generations of people we have never met.

That a sense of proportion comes from a belief in something outside, and greater, than oneself. That transcendental sense is missing in the modern world, and its absence contributes directly to mindless, environment-destroying, consumerism.

John Bruton was leader of Fine Gael until February 2001. He first entered the Dáil in 1969 at the age of 22 and became leader of his party in 1990. He was Taoiseach between December 1994 and June 1997.



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