

Is Sustainability the Enemy of Progress or the Key to Creating a Future Worth Having? Three Provocative Perspectives on Sustainability, Climate Change and the Future

Stephen McGrail
Centre for Sustainability Leadership
Australia

Abstract

This review article of recent books on sustainability and climate change provides an overview and comparison of three provocative responses to the contemporary sustainability problematique. Current and potentially emerging ways of thinking about sustainability, climate change and the future are revealed. In particular, considered together the three books bring to life the huge social inertia resisting worldview change and the related politics of change and the future associated with sustainability. Following critical consideration of underlying key themes, different ways of reading the books to derive insights into sustainability challenges and in terms of futures studies are suggested.

Keywords: sustainability, climate change, progress, worldviews, sustainable development, politics of the future, politics of sustainability

The Enemies of Progress: the dangers of sustainability by Austin Williams (Societas, 2008, 156 pp.)

The Geography of Hope: a tour of the world we need by Chris Turner (Random House Canada, 2007, 469pp.)

An Appeal to Reason: a cool look at global warming by Nigel Lawson (Duckworth Overlook, 2008, 149pp.)

Climate change and sustainability were key themes at the 2008 Alfred Deakin Innovation Lectures and are the focus of the 2009 Deakins.¹ Two fiercely opposed speakers during the 2008 lectures are the authors of highly provocative books on sustainability. Their lectures were my introduction to Williams's *The Enemies of Progress: the Dangers of Sustainability* and Turner's *The Geography of Hope*. Lawson, a former British chancellor of the exchequer, has published the equally provocative *An Appeal to Reason*. Like Williams, Lawson advocates a rethink of the climate change and sustainability agenda. Considered together they suggest that 22 years on from the Bruntland Report, *Our Common Future*, which put "sustainable development" on the international policy map, the politics of change may be intensifying as sustainability and environmentalism grow in influence. They also give us insights into the future of the issue of sustainability. What follows is a brief overview of each book, reflections on the perspectives they offer, and critical consideration of some underlying key themes.

In *The Enemies of Progress*, Williams attempts to mount a convincing case against sustainability. He thinks it is 'an insidiously dangerous concept' (p.2). The purpose of the book is to 'argue that sustainable development is the enemy of development; that environmentalism is the enemy of humanism; ergo sustainability is the enemy of progress' (p.2). Williams aims to critically explore sustainability's 'all pervasive influence on society' (p.2), reviewing transport (Chapter 1), energy (Chapter 2), education (Chapter 4), China and India (Chapter 5), developing world (Chapter 6) and the USA (Chapter 7). In essence, he argues that sustainable development is "masquerading" as progress. Some of the chapter titles give a clear sense of his perspective: 'The Opt-Outs', 'The Limit-Setters', 'The Pessimists', and 'The Indoctrinators'.

An architect by profession, Williams also writes passionately about the influence of sustainability on architecture. He claims it is causing 'architects [to] find themselves caught up in nonsensical environmental claims making' (p.60) and to *conform* to green development trends. Such alleged conforming is central to his claim that sustainability is a pervasive new orthodoxy depressing critical engagement. The following passage from the introduction captures both the tone and perspective:

Whereas once we looked to the future with anticipation, today we can only tremble with trepidation ... Rather than opening up society to the unfettered flow of ideas and human ingenuity, sustainability feeds the insular, cowed, and aspiration-lite times in which we live. It nourishes only restraint. It encourages a world made up of individuals connected only by their common lack of trust and fear in the future (pp.2&5).

Throughout *The Enemies of Progress* Williams takes a dim view of recent and proposed changes in response to environmental limits. For example, the chapter on transport argues "sustainable transport" policy trends towards are anti-transport and represent a 'fundamental rejection of the social ambition for more and better mobility' (p.33). He laments that 'straightforward tasks like catching the bus or taking the car are now turned into major moral dilemmas' (p.17). Adoption of such policies is seen as part of a 'modern miserabilist malaise', fed by greater anxiety about the futures and acceptance of natural barriers. The most radical analysis relates to the politics of sus-

tainability. Williams – as a self-described "old lefty"² – is suspicious of the establishment's motivations in embracing sustainability.

The book concludes with a call for fellow *progressive humanists* to 'reclaim the future' and the 'progressive humanistic imperative'. This involves, for example, viewing growing populations as a good thing and 'a source of innovation, creativity, imagination and socialisation' (p.149), renouncing 'the view that humanity has a malign impact on the planet' (p.105), and moving towards a 'human-centred politics'. If 'our ambition is to put nature first, humans come second' (p.152), he asserts.

Reclaiming the future from "doom and gloom" is the task Turner gave himself in *The Geography of Hope*. In contrast to Williams *The Enemies of Progress*, he argues 'sustainability must replace democracy as the beacon held aloft' (p.397). Turner offers a new vision of sustainability, describing innovations suggesting that humankind can 'chart a course in a new direction... toward more sustainable shores' (p.27). Turner is a former magazine writer and this wide-ranging book of two parts, 'Geography of Hope' and 'Infrastructure of Hope', is like a collection of feature articles. Turner is critical of the environmental movement, describing it as 'a movement of despair, a politics of decay' (p.23) and is also concerned that the term sustainability has been applied so 'widely and carelessly it verges sometimes on meaninglessness' (p.26). The style is captured by the following passage, written at a wind farm:

So I sit with my daughter, watching the blades spin, and I begin to understand what sustainability truly means. Removed from the spin cycle of corporate public relations, a flat buzzword reinflated to its full weight, sustainability again becomes epochal, a wellspring of social change, a revolutionary concept as powerfully, progressively disruptive as democracy once was... My daughter and I can sit here, in the shadow of these blades, as long as we like, and no matter how long they turn, no matter how many megawatts of power they generate, they'll do us no harm (p.7).

The first part, '*Geography of Hope*', sets the scene in terms of the form of environmentalism and sustainability being championed. Turner explores this in chapters covering energy, transport, housing, design and cities. The innovations described range from groundbreaking (e.g. new thin-film solar photovoltaic cells, micro-credit in developing countries), emerging prototypes (e.g. hydrogen fuel-cell powered cars), through to the strange (e.g. "Suncatcher Earthship" homes made from old tyres). In part two '*Infrastructure of Hope*', the term infrastructure refers to the conceptual "scaffolding" Turner believes is required. He discusses economic issues and models, sustainability ideologies, new institutions, and "sustainable communities". Overall, the book is a journalistic overview of well-known and new sustainability innovations and concepts.

In a powerful Epilogue, Turner contends that he has learned that the 'the most useful skill, by far, is to learn to examine the same old vista with new eyes' (p.429). He then imagines possible applications of the innovations and ideas reported on in his home town of Calgary, adding that 'I can stand here... and assemble a map of limitless possibility. And that is practically the definition of a geography of hope. The most delirious fun is in conjuring up some of the fantastical future-tense ideas' (p.433). This

is stark contrast with the Prologue, which laments the two current horizons he sees in his home town: the surface-level story of 'living in a golden age' and what he instead saw as the sun beginning to set on the current era.

The final book considered here is Lawson's *An Appeal to Reason*. It is his response to 'the new religion of global warming'. Lawson's goal is to ensure society avoids 'being panicked into what could be disastrously damaging action' (p.21) and to challenge the 'prevailing orthodoxy... that tough measures are urgently needed' (p.81). His conclusion provides a clear summary: 'we appear to have entered a new age of unreason, which threatens to be as economically harmful as it is profoundly disquieting. It is from this, above all, that we really do need to save the planet' (p.106).

Lawson challenges the motivations of those advocating urgent action. He attempts to reduce the expected costs associated with possible future climate changes and to increase the expected costs of taking action (the opposite of the high-profile Stern Review). The flow of Lawson's argument is as follows:

1. Climate change science is more uncertain than we've been led to believe and our understanding of the climate system is in its infancy (chapter 1).
2. Disaster does not 'stare us in the face if we do not take urgent action to save the planet' (p.25) (chapter 2). Lawson *plays up* uncertainty and *plays down* the likely costs of additional warming.
3. The adaptation capacities of humankind are underestimated and increasing all the time (chapter 3).
4. Nightmare scenarios, such as those of sea level rise, don't substantially add to the "existential threat" as they are low-risk possibilities (chapter 4).
5. Moving ahead with effective mitigation, to the extent required to stabilise atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide emissions, is 'costly masochism' (p.62) (chapter 5).
6. Linked with this, the true cost of decarbonising the world economy is not well understood, is likely to be more costly than anticipated, and conflicts with other goals e.g. energy security (chapter 6).
7. Taking radical action requires an ethics that cares more about the welfare of remote future generations than the present generation and our children's generation (chapter 7).

On this basis, Lawson concludes the movement is a "convenient religion" and that the 'major change in our way of life' required to drastically reduce emissions is not justified (chapter 8). He argues the 'gap between rhetoric and reality when it comes to global warming... is far greater than I can recall with any other issue in a lifetime of either observing or practicing politics' (p.103).

The final chapter brings a new political dimension to the book. He contends that those who dislike capitalism are driving the rise of global warming alarmism:

With the collapse of Marxism, and to all intents and purposes of other forms of socialism too, those who dislike capitalism, not least on the global scale, and its foremost exemplar, the United States with equal passion, have been obliged to find a new creed. For many of them, green is the new red (p.101).

Initial Reflections on These Three Perspectives

It is tempting to dismiss Williams' *The Enemies of Progress* as an irrelevant polemical rant. This seemed to be the response of most people at the Deakins. I saw more value in what he had to say, even if I disagreed with most of it. First, many people do have concerns that efforts to mitigate climate change might 'sacrifice the gains of modernity' (p.139) and in relation to how related debates are conducted (e.g. the population debate). Second, it prompted me to reflect deeply on my assumptions and consider the "paradigms" in sustainability thinking. At times it can seem like there are *unthinking* orthodoxies emerging. Third, it is valuable to consider the impact of painting likely futures as a bleak place (as the environmental movement and futures community tend to do). We may see ourselves as realists, but others may dismiss us as negative pessimists.

A key point at which I sharply diverge from Williams is his views on the 'modern miserablist malaise'. He is aware of the dialogue in the environmental movement about addressing its negativity but remains unconvinced: 'environmentalists have a singular problem', he writes, 'which is their underlying message... [is] an unequivocally miserable one' (p.146). Unlike Williams I don't see the contemporary sustainability movement as the *cause* of the malaise; I see it as a positive *response* to it.

Another way of reading the book can be framed as personal narrative: perhaps Williams' experiences in architecture grew into societal analysis. That is, the "limits" and 'contemporary world of restrictive, sustainable practice' he writes about seemed unjustified and he looked for a political explanation. Williams' book may be a weak signal of increasing resentment of the cultural or regulatory restrictions needed to help address environmental challenges.

The key weakness of this book is its lack of engagement with environmental challenges. Instead, it's political. Moreover, Williams' claim that sustainability has depressed critical engagement is ridiculous, given the far-reaching questions it raises. Sustainability considerations can also be the key stimulant for the creativity and ambition he so clearly desires.

Turner's *Geography of Hope* is more convincing but should be read critically. A large proportion of the content isn't new if you work in the sustainability field and it is not as comprehensive as other overviews.³ However, the book succeeded in stimulating the "rational exuberance" he advocates. The book is full of inspiring turns of phrase such as 'the atrophy of the collective imagination' (p.91) and 'recalibrating the global boundaries of the realm of the possible' (p.83) and this is ultimately what the sustainability movement is all about – improved "forward views" and foresight. Olson (1994), drawing heavily on Polak's (1961) work, usefully describes this as 'rekindling the social imagination'.⁴ I also agree that a more positive framing, which stimulates hope and is conducive to action, is important.

Turner's book can also be seen as embodying a model of empowerment. Through the process of researching and writing the book – his "tour of the world we need" – Turner's understanding of sustainability problems and solutions grows, leading to new imaginative ideas, positive visions and a growing sense of agency. His own personal transformation through a form of environmental scanning and increased futures thinking is profound and should be noted by futures practitioners.

Lawson's *An Appeal to Reason* fails to make a convincing case for an 'irrational global warming religion'. Whilst the "denialist" style arguments found in this book against the current climate change consensus have been rebutted elsewhere,⁵ some aspects need a response. Lawson's view is *anthropomorphic* and is a striking example of economic optimism. This *perspective* assumes that increasing wealth will provide the wherewithal to address undesirable effects (e.g. future environmental problems) and celebrates ingenuity (Gibson, Hassan, Holtz, Tansey, & Whitelaw, 2005). Lawson embodies this whilst failing to appropriately consider actual observable changes, such as the Arctic Ice melt and ocean acidification, whose longer-term systemic consequences are unknown. He even quite incredibly asserts that it is not clear that there would 'be any net cost at all' of further global warming (p.92)!

Lawson's championing of adaptation is also misguided. As the 2007/08 UN Human Development Report argues, there are extreme inequalities in adaptation capacity. Rich countries are investing in climate change "defence systems" whilst people in poor developing countries, who will suffer the most damaging impacts, are left to sink or swim and cannot adapt (United Nations, 2007). This makes a mockery of his argument that advocates of urgent action on climate change are the enemies of poverty reduction in the developing world.

Lawson *may* be on stronger ground in his assertion that "greenies" are campaigning for anti-capitalist reasons. No doubt some are; however, he is wrong to consider this to be the whole movement. Most seek reform but not revolution. This exposes the slightly ironic core problem with *An Appeal to Reason*: the author's political agenda clouds the analysis.

Deeper Considerations (or, "What's Really Going on Here?")

First, the books bring to life the deeper battle between different ideas about humanity's ideal relationship with nature. This battle lies behind current key debates such as how to address climate change. Moreover, they suggest that further shifts away from modernist notions of progress will clearly stimulate greater resistance. This tension at the level of *worldviews* is the second key aspect.

Williams takes the instrumentalist view of 'overcoming natural barriers'. He views this as the core of progress. Similarly, Lawson is anthropocentric in his views and does not consider the impact of climate change on, for example, other species and biodiversity. Turner, in contrast, has ideals and ideas that embrace more of an ecological perspective (i.e. "ecocentric"). In the academic literature such a distinction is made between "weak" and "strong" conceptions of sustainability (see Table 1 below):

Table 1
The sustainability spectrum: from weak to strong sustainability (Pearce & Turner, 1990)

	Technocentric sustainability) <i>Cornucopian</i>	(or “weak” <i>Accommodating</i>	Ecocentric sustainability) <i>Communist</i>	(or “strong” <i>Deep ecology</i>
Green labels	Resource exploitation; growth oriented	Resource conservation; managerial	Resource preservationist	Extreme preservationist position
Type of economy	Unfettered free market	Green economy; environment economic instruments	Steady state economy; environmental protection prioritised	Heavy regulated economy; minimised resource use
Management strategies	Economic policy objectives; maximise gross national product (GNP) growth; trust the markets; full substitution between forms of capital	Modified economic growth; green accounting; reject substitutability; constant capital rule	Zero economic growth and population growth; systems perspective and ecosystem health important; small-scale, community-level focus	Reduced economy and population; environmental ethics central
Ethics	Anthropocentric; instrumental value in nature	Widen notion of stewardship; intergenerational equity considered	Extension of ethical responsibilities to non-humans; strongly communitarian	Acceptance of bioethics; intrinsic value in nature; millennial stand

Related to the worldview conflict, the three titles highlight the key tension underlying the contemporary sustainability problematique, that is, the tension between actors who have faith in modernist "progress" (and hold a *linear optimist* viewpoint) and those who are "*systemic optimists*", holding views based on activist-oriented sustainable development (Eckersley, 2006). The intensifying battle between such perspectives is central to conflicting visions and the possible realisation of a sustainable future.

Third, the increasing future orientation caused by the issue of sustainability and the climate change debate appear to be generating a new politics of the future. Each author is clearly concerned about the future. Williams wants to "reclaim" the future from sustainability, believing that 'the underlying idea... behind sustainability, that we shouldn't do things today that may be detrimental to the future... gives a very risk-averse, precautionary, safe, fairly sanctimonious attitude to creativity' (as quoted in Dowling & Houston, 2008). He told *The Age* newspaper that, 'sustainability is the first thing we have to get rid of before we can clearly have a vision of what the future could possibly be'. Similarly, Lawson is concerned about how the future may be shaped by climate activists. In contrast, Turner is terrified by potential climate change scenarios and the book is a call-to-arms for new positive visions of a "sustainable future".

These different concerns lead to different proposed responses. Turner sees great potential in accelerated action to address climate change. Lawson, in stark contrast,

argues that this 'would mean unwinding the industrial revolution and returning to pastoral society' (p.45). Such debates – similar to what is happening in the public discourse – leave us with either/or propositions. Climate change debates and sustainability are full of such *conjectures* but also competing ethics of the future. Lawson, for example, contends that, 'at the heart of the issue of climate change is the question of how great a sacrifice is right to ask the people of this generation and the next to make in the hope of benefiting future generations' (p.94). What could (or should) be the roles of futures studies field given this and its contribution to the difficulties in achieving action?

Concluding Thoughts – for Sustainability, Futures Studies and Our Common Future

The books add to our understanding of the contested nature of "sustainable development". Deeper tensions appear likely to become more problematic as activists increase their push for faster, systemic change. Vob, Newig, Kastens, Monstadt and Nolting (2007, p.193) put it well:

Sustainable development, by embracing coupled dynamics of societal and ecological systems on a global scale and over the long term, is an extremely ambitious concept. It provokes dispute because it calls into question concepts, institutions and everyday practices that are based on faith in progress and articulates a responsibility of society for the outcome of these complex interactions. [Emphasis added]

I have found three insights into sustainability challenges particularly useful. First, similar concerns exist inside and outside the environmental movement about how it is currently framed. This suggests an opportunity for more inclusive dialogue which could be grounded, as Dunlop (2009) suggests, in the more neutral frames of *risk management* and the *management of uncertainty*. Second, sustainable development provokes dispute for two key reasons – the degree of disturbance to current ways of life and background political dimensions. British writer Chris Patten has also identified these political tensions. Regarding negative reactions to proposed measures to addressing climate change, he contended 'I suspect that the view is sometimes taken that having successfully fought socialism, we should not allow more central controls and regulation of our lives to allowed in through the green door' (Patten, 2008, p. 353). This adds weight to view that only a crisis will stimulate action (i.e. it is necessary to generate acceptance of such disturbance and go beyond politics). Third, we need to consider both how to operationalise sustainability thinking and the barriers to it. How can futures studies contribute? Considering that both fields seek to establish a better societal relationship with the future, greater collaboration is clearly warranted.

There are also different ways to read these texts in terms of futures studies. One is through an emerging issues analysis framework. One such issue may be a backlash against the climate change movement – particularly if everyday practices are increasingly questioned. How will people respond to this and emerging moral dilemmas? Experiencing carbon guilt for traveling by plane may just be the beginning. Will we

collectively be capable of taking responsibility for the outcome of such complex interactions between social and ecological systems? Second, the creation of future scenarios of plausible responses to climate change need to consider the interaction of systemic, cultural, intentional and behavioural factors (Pearman, 2009; Slaughter, 1998). These titles also suggest alternative futures for the environment and climate change movements.

Finally, whilst I can relate to Williams' concerns about the "modern miserablist malaise," the challenge is to respond appropriately to the complex challenges facing humanity. As Turner stated at the Deakins, this must involve 'reconsidering what we have done to get to this point and then adjusting accordingly'.

Correspondence

Stephen McGrail
Centre for Sustainability Leadership
E-mail: stephen.mcgrail@gmail.com
57 Arden Street, North Melbourne,
VIC, Australia, 3051

Notes

1. The Alfred Deakin Innovation Lectures are an annual free lecture series supported by the State Government of Victoria, Australia (specifically an initiative of the Innovation Economy Advisory Board). The 2009 lecture series has the theme Climate and Innovation. The 2009 lectures "aim to inform, provoke and stimulate debate, ideas and conversations about how innovation can transform the economy, society and the environment in response to climate change."
2. Williams discussed his political leanings with me after one of the Deakin Innovation lectures. He described himself as an "old lefty" (i.e. with far-left, anti-establishment positions and political views)
3. Readers wishing to gain an rigorous overview of sustainability challenges and proposed solutions would be better served by Lester Brown's 'plan of hope' (Brown, 2008) or the Worldwatch Institute's *Innovations for a Sustainable Economy* (Starke, 2008)
4. Moreover, Olson (1994) argues that the concept of a "sustainable society" is "one of the few images of the future to arise in our time with the kind of imaginative force that Polak believed could draw the present to itself and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like all the most powerful images of the future, it is not a clear-cut image or a static utopia. It is a new direction for the elaboration of visions, a whole new context for technology, politics, economics, religion and art, abounding in possibilities" (p.168).
5. For example, see <http://www.skepticalscience.com/> for a list of top "denialist" arguments.

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