

Seminar, 14th March 2011

- **Future Generations and governance of sustainable development**
- **Issues and new initiatives in the UK and beyond**
- **Ian Christie, CES**



View of the Thames Barrier, E London, 2007

Questions about the future and SD

- What sort of relationship between present and future generations is required for Sustainable Development?
- How can it be embodied in governance - systems of representation and decision-making?

Issues and initiatives

- SD as an ethical stance towards the future
- Objections to the Long View
- Issues for future generations
- Timescales
- Initiatives
- Finland, Israel and Hungary
- The FSDS
- Alliance for Future Generations
- Post-SDC arrangements in the UK
- Rupert Read and the Guardians proposal
- Next steps

A familiar statement

- Brundtland Commission (WCED, 01987)
- Sustainable Development: *development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*
- Implications and issues:
 - Development decisions now must take the needs of future generations into account
 - We must have a way of identifying their needs
- How far ahead does this commitment reach?

A less well-known one

- **Nick Clegg, deputy PM, 9th September 2010**
 - **‘The other guiding purpose of the Coalition is to govern for the long term - to take the necessary steps now to ensure a fairer and more prosperous future. Our political culture - and in many ways our society more generally - has become too focused on immediate needs and demands, rather than considering our obligations to the future. We need to look towards a further horizon. It is this second guiding purpose – the horizon shift – that I will address today.**
 - **The challenge of acting over a longer time horizon is not simply one for this Government, or even just for politics. It is an issue for society as a whole. But it is vital that the Government leads by example.**
 - **Today I will:**
 - 1) **illustrate the problem of short-termism in our culture generally**
 - 2) **argue for justice between generations and warn that we are in danger of failing the next generation**
 - 3) **describe ways of committing to the long term**
 - 4) **examine the causes and symptoms of political myopia; and**

More from Nick Clegg, 9/9/02010

So far I've talked about short-termism in the context of business and personal life. But there is a generational question at stake here too. Many of the decisions we make today will affect the lives of our children, and our children's children. Social justice is about the relations between classes, nations, races and genders – but it includes justice between the generations, too.

My colleague David Willetts reports in his book *The Pinch* that some north American Indian tribal councils judged the impact of their decisions over seven generations. The liberal philosopher John Rawls described how a socially just society was one taken by people unaware of what position they would occupy within it. But Rawls also insisted that the people behind his famous 'veil of ignorance' must consider the consequences of their actions over 'at least two generations'.

This has not been the ethos that has guided us in recent decades. The Prime Minister and I are from the same generation. And frankly, we know that both our generation - and the one before us - got it wrong. We have run up debts, despoiled the planet and allowed too many of our institutions to wither. For us, the longer-term view we are adopting in government will help to wipe the slate clean, and ensure that future generations can thrive, without being burdened with the dead weight of our debt, and our failings.

We are absolutely determined that we will be able to look our children and grandchildren in the eye and say we did the best we could for them, even if this means taking some difficult, unpopular decisions today.

The long term in UK politics

- Climate policy - targets out to 2050
- Flood defence - Thames Estuary 2100 project of the Environment Agency
- Scenario planning - 2020, 2030, 2050
- Major infrastructure planning
- But.. no formal mechanisms for acting on the Deputy PM's commitment to concern for future generations
- Does it make sense to develop them?
- What innovations could be tried?

Objections to an intergenerational ethic

- ‘What’s posterity ever done for me?’
- Unborn generations do not exist and cannot be said to have any rights
- We cannot know what they would want
- We cannot maintain long-range concern in politics and everyday life: ‘deep needs of the present’ (John Foster, *The Sustainability Mirage*, Earthscan 2008)
- How far out does our supposed obligation extend? Are long-range horizons not simply arbitrary?
- How can non-existent people be represented? Whose decision counts?

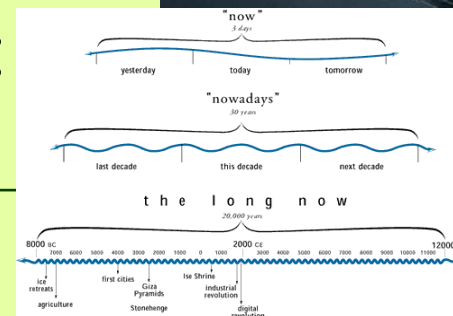
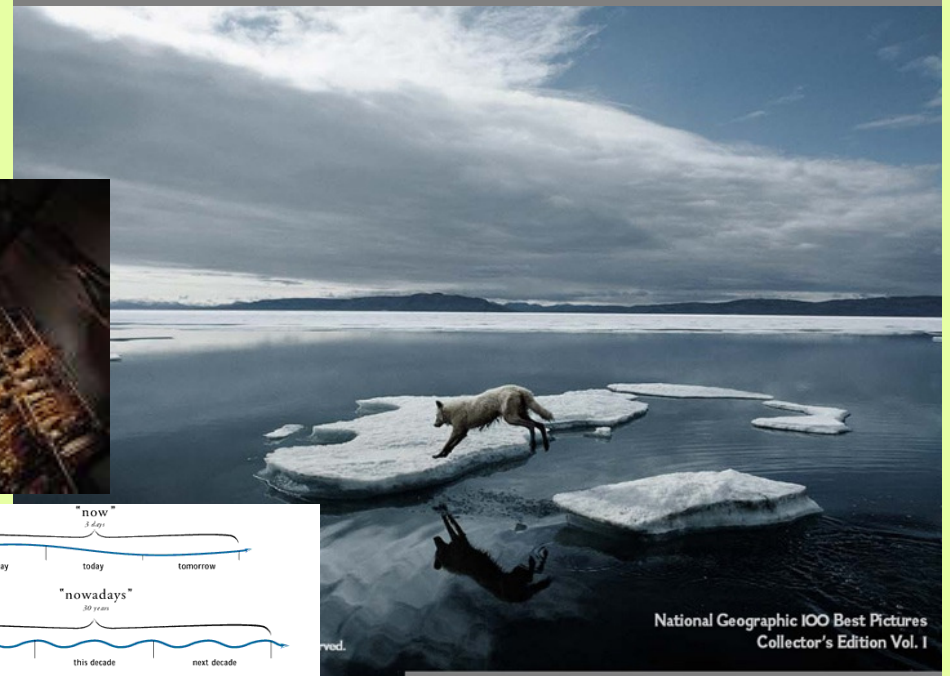
Present decisions and remote impacts

- Climate change
- Nuclear waste
- CCS
- Biodiversity loss
- Geo-engineering
- We do impose costs and risks
- How far ahead must we plan?



How far ahead should we look?

- Colin Tudge, *The Day Before Yesterday*: 1m years as a unit of political time
- Roland Clift: 500 years...
- The Long Now Foundation: 10,000 years...
- Tim O’Riordan, UEA: 100 years at least



National Geographic 100 Best Pictures
Collector's Edition Vol. 1

What next?

- How could actually existing democracies evolve to **improve the quality of democracy AND improve capacities to pursue sustainable development and avert climate disruption?**

“[We need] a democracy for posterity, an ecological democracy that enables both the citizen and the representative to be capable of designing sustainable futures for a very long way ahead...”

Professor Tim O’Riordan



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Humankind’s ability to cope with the sustainable development challenges of the twenty-first century is dependent on evolution in systems of democratic decision-making.

See www.fdsd.org

Governance for the very long run

- Initiatives:
- Finland: Committee for the Future - Parliamentary Standing Cttee since 1993 - periodic 'future statement' reports
- Israel: Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations since 2001 (vacant since 2006)
- Hungary: Parliamentary Commissioner for Environment and Future Generations, since 2008

The FDSO

- Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development
- www.fdsd.org
- *Projects:*
- Future of Democracy and Sustainable Development
- Democracies and Climate Change
- Democracies and Future Generations
- Alliance for Future Generations: network of NGOs

FDSD and Alliance for Future Generations

- FDSD/UKELA invitation to Hungarian Parliamentary Commissioner for Environment and Future Generations
- Seminar involving DEFRA and Ministry of Justice in London, Spring 2010
- Letter to new Coalition on 1st June 2010 calling for new 'politics of the future'
- Evidence to Parliamentary EAC on governance of sustainable development in Whitehall and UK
- Study group formed to explore possible innovations in UK governance
- Report by Peter Roderick (Dec. 2010) for FDSD and WWF-UK on *Taking the Longer View*
- FDSD, WWF and other NGOs: Alliance for Future Generations

Post-SDC arrangements

- Breakthroughs project of SDC: suggestion for a ‘congress’ on interests of future generations
- SDC in Wales: interest in explicit ‘futures’ element in governance of sustainable development in Wales
- Cabinet Office: an ‘Office for the Future’? Interest from CO minister Oliver Letwin
- NGOs and academics: DIY version of the SDC, highlighting issues for future generations?

Dr Rupert Read: Future Guardians

- Rupert Read: UEA philosopher and Green Party councillor in Norwich
- Forthcoming paper on idea of institution of Guardians for future generations' interests
- Critique of existing governance arrangements, including the Hungarian model
- Democracy must include future people
- This must be formalised in constitution
- And be part of wider SD transition...

Some reading

- FSDS papers and blog articles on future generations and sustainable development - www.fdsd.org
- John Foster, *The Sustainability Mirage* (London: Earthscan, 2008)
- Stefan Skrimshire (ed), *Future Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2010)
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