Last December the federal government released the final reports of the working groups which had been commissioned to spell out what ‘ecologically sustainable development’ might mean for Australia over the next few decades. The production of nine sectoral reports plus the collection of ‘executive summaries’ was the culmination of an intense and—in an Australian context—a unique process of consultation between government, business, union and conservation groups about the reconciliation of economic development and environmental conservation.

Yet after all this hard work the ESD reports caused barely a ripple of public discussion. At the time, we were all too caught up with the GST package and the ALP leadership drama it precipitated to pay much attention to ESD. So, at the beginning of 1992, does it mean that the GST package represents the future of Australian politics, and ESD—whose chief sponsors after all were John Kerin and Bob Hawke—might already be consigned to its past?

I doubt it. Whatever the fortunes of the GST package in the short term, ESD is here to stay. ‘Sustainable development’— the serious integration of environmental priorities into mainstream social and economic policy-making—is firmly on the global political agenda. The catalogue of environmental problems brought about by continued industrial development won’t go away.

And whatever the preoccupations of Australian policy-makers, the challenge of reconciling economic and environmental demands is reshaping global political institutions. This coming June in Rio, 150 world leaders and around 30,000 participants will meet for an ‘Earth Summit’, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which has the formal goal of producing global conventions on climate change and biodiversity, as well as formulating ‘Agenda 21’—a blueprint for ‘sustainable development’ into the 21st century.

‘ESD’ was a major part of the federal government’s response to the wave of environmental concern of the late 1980s. The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Culture, had led the way in promoting the concept of sustainable development. With a particular concern for the impact of Third World poverty on the global environment, the Brundtland Commission had argued that conservation and growth were interdependent rather than antithetical. Sustainable development was therefore an attractive concept for governments having to deal with anti-growth environmentalists. You could have growth and be green as well. In June 1990, the federal government issued its own discussion paper before establishing the more technically focused ‘working group’ phase in 1991.

After a brief period of public discussion about the general idea of ‘sustainable development’, the federal government established the nine working groups which were given the brief of applying a set of ESD principles to the areas of agriculture, energy production, energy use, fisheries, forestry, manufacturing, mining, tourism and transport. The membership of the various working groups was made up of representatives from federal and state bureaucracies, the relevant industry associations, unions, conservation and consumer organisations.

It is impossible adequately to summarise the recommendations. The reports vary in their coherence, degree of ‘greenness’ and in the applicability of their recommendations. The Agriculture report supported initiatives for ‘whole farm planning approaches’, the strengthening of integrated catchment management programs and extension of the kinds of community self help group activities already flourishing under the Decade of Landcare Plan. The Energy Production report was rather pale in its ‘greenness’, placing its hope in greater efficiency, pricing mechanisms, more competition and innovation in the energy supply sector, the choice of the most economically efficient fuel sources, and models of least cost planning, rather than any firm commitments to doing away with coal fired power stations and speeding up the diffusion of alternative renewable energy sources. The Energy Use report was greener in its more detailed attention to the greenhouse effect and acid rain.

The Forestry report recognised the ‘recent shift in values’ about forests and recommended a more efficient and dynamic timber and forest products industry—but the absence of the conservationist perspective was obvious and one would struggle to get from this report much of a feel for the often acrimonious debate about forest use in this country. The Manufacturing report linked the goal of environmental sustainability to the ‘clever country’ agenda of developing ‘a robust internationally competitive, export oriented manufacturing sector’ emphasising the positive commercial gains arising from new products and processes introduced for reasons of pollution control, waste management, energy efficiency and climate change. The Transport report talked about better vehicles and better fuels, but more importantly, addressed the need for co-ordinated approach to creating ‘better cities’ through greater use of urban villages, public transport and traffic calming.

Despite the difficulties in reaching consensus among often antagonistic interest groups, the ESD reports did represent a concerted attempt to develop a package of agreed measures which could make specific industry sectors more ecologically sustainable.
The prospects for wholesale implementation are not good, but at least they set some kind of foundation for a more serious, ongoing greening of Australian industry.

Why then has all this worthy policy work on issues of such enduring importance had such a muted reaction from the rest of us? The more obvious reason has to do with the phenomenon of (political) climate change. ESD was perhaps a victim of the 'issue attention cycle'. By 1991, the green awareness of the late 1980s had peaked, and the media had done as much as their ratings warranted to dramatise the environmental catastrophes that had been predicted for the next 50 years or so. Besides, by 1991 the economy was in deep recession. Debate about long-term environmental problems seemed a bit of a diversion from the real problems of jobs, investment and generating any kind of growth at all.

The change of political climate was perhaps outside the control of the Canberra bureaucrats managing the ESD process. However, they did have a lot to do with several other reasons for the reduced visibility of ESD.

The first was the very limited agenda set by the bureaucrats—an agenda which, as Val Brown and John Dargavel have observed, ignored most of the 'people' issues: employment, training, urban life, women's issues, immigration and multiculturalism. In midstream, the secretariat attempted to deal with some of these as 'intersectoral' issues (the final reports on these areas have yet to be released), but the fact remains that ESD was defined very narrowly in terms of the areas of primary and resource extractive industries. Also, notwithstanding the Prime Minister's directive to address 'the global dimension', the working groups had been largely preoccupied with national issues, thus deflecting some of the most basic challenges of ESD.

A second reason was the limited constituency involved in the ESD process. While the ESD broke new ground in involving elite representatives from industry, conservation and union sectors in the policy making process, it nonetheless created a relatively closed policy community.

Despite its avowed commitment to 'public consultation', the one day consultations in several centres around Australia following the release of the draft reports in August left many people with an active interest in ESD dissatisfied with the level of input.

The limited interest in ESD, Canberra-style, is also probably due to its highly constrained discourse. The environment is, after all, one of the great debates of late 20th century industrialised society. It raises questions of vision, of national purpose and of hope and despair about the future. It requires a public discourse about politics, ethics and religion, about the past and the future of European settlement in this land, and of our responsibilities to Australia's indigenous inhabitants. This kind of discourse is almost entirely absent from the ESD Reports.

To be fair, the constraints lay as much in the construction of the ongoing ESD process as in the working groups themselves. From the outset of the public debate in 1990, all of the major participants operated more or less uncritically within the dominant framework of market liberalism. ESD was interpreted technocratically as the 'finessing' of market processes in order to 'internalise' environmental externalities.

If the earlier phase of public discussion had been shaped by the discourse of market liberalism, the working group phase was dominated by the discourse of technical management. Environmental problems were conceived of in almost totally technical terms: no messy politics, no ideologically passionate, no political interests. The reports provide us with no interpretation of the past, no sense of understanding of how our cultural traditions and political and economic institutions have shaped our behavior towards our natural environment. Needless to say, the reports are equally silent about how our traditions might need to change.

As a result, the ESD reports—like the Hawke government itself at the end of 1991—lacked any larger vision which could give political and cultural meaning to its economic policies. The business of government had been reduced to the technical tasks of fine tuning economic settings, leaving it to the market to provide any larger sense of national purpose. In comparison, even John Hewson's recycled Thatcherism seemed more visionary.

There is a risk that the inclination of the bureaucrats, the preoccupations of the politicians and the inattention of the electorate will allow ESD to languish, at least for a time. That would be a great pity, considering the work already done and the potential for developing the ESD consultative process further. Clive Hamilton, a policy researcher for the Resource Assessment Commission, has argued for the creation of an Office of ESD within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to continue the task of co-ordinating and developing ESD policies within the federal bureaucracy and consulting with state governments and major interest groups. Hamilton also favours the creation of a legislative framework in the form of a
Natural Resource Management Act which would establish the key principles and criteria of ESD, and establish environmental guidelines for development policies and proposals.

While such legislative and bureaucratic initiatives are essential, we still need a public debate about sustainable development which links the issue to other major policy issues. An Office of ESD could do much to further such a debate. The first item on the agenda would be to extend the discussion about ESD beyond the current focus on resource development. ESD is about people, about jobs, cities, communities, gender relations, production systems, industrial relations, the arts and so on. A key area is that of industry policy. Sadly, few of the movers and shakers in industry policy have seriously started to think green. Yet, as the ACF has pointed out, there are enormous investment opportunities and markets for ecologically adapted products and services.

Another agenda item is cities. Urban issues were dealt with in the ESD transport report, with recommendations for radical changes in land use and transport in our cities. Yet urban sustainability is not just about infrastructure, but also touches on questions of the quality of neighbourhoods, quality of life, levels of crime and access to educational, employment and other opportunities.

Eventually, the ESD agenda will need to shift from its currently nationalist concerns to a broader globalist orientation. After all, the really big problems of environmental sustainability have to do with the global economy, and are intimately connected with the huge disparities between the rich and the poor. Already, environmental issues are strengthening moves towards some form of world governance which could be more effective than the present UN. The global nature of problems such as the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion and acid rain has generated the political momentum for producing global conventions. Furthermore, the increased movement of large numbers of populations will mean that involvement in pre-emptive population management measures and more open migration policies will become part of the Australian ESD agenda. Sadly, in our current immigration debates, the environmental factor is used only as an argument to reduce our response to global population issues.

It should also not be beyond the wit and wisdom of an Office of ESD to facilitate the involvement of a much wider constituency in the ESD process. One of the disappointing aspects of the ESD process in 1991 was the lack of real recognition given to a wide range of local, regional and state activities concerned with reconciling development and environmental issues.

It is probably a bit much, however, to ask our Canberra technocrats to initiate a more philosophically reflective discussion about sustainable development. Nevertheless, someone has to do it, because ‘sustainable development’ remains a highly contestable term which more than a few people still regard as an oxymoron.

There is a lively philosophical debate about ‘the environment’ which floats around the edges of ESD, and which highlights the great metaphysical and spiritual divide between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. Advocates of ecofeminism, deep ecology, and the like attack the ‘dominant paradigm’ in the name of a ‘new environmental paradigm’ which they claim eschews the values of the domination of nature, patriarchy, mechanistic science and instrumental rationality in favour of non-intellectual modes of experience and harmony with nature.

Sustainable development needs to be recognised as one important site among many in a multi-faceted debate about the future of liberal capitalism. With the collapse of centralised state socialism, liberalism, it seems, has become the unchallenged standard bearer for industrial progress. Yet the liberal vision of society, too, is under attack and a range of diverse ideological and political traditions, from civic republicanism, communitarianism, associational socialism, and feminism through to ecological naturalism and Christian radicalism jostle for attention.

Yet, as Boris Frankel has pointed out in his attack on ‘post-industrial utopians’, it is not enough for such traditions to offer a return to a simpler non-industrial past. They must deal with the real problems of maintaining the (industrial) life support systems for a global population of upwards of 10 billion people in the foreseeable future. It will mean the creation of political institutions and a moral environment—a public philosophy—which can provide the resources and guidance for transition towards a sustainable society.

Alan Durning has described the astonishing array of grass roots organisations around the world which are dealing with their situations of poverty and environmental degradation in creative ways. Yet as Durning points out, small may be beautiful, but by itself it is insignificant. There is a crucial role for mediating organisations—the non-government organisations which provide the backup resources for communities and which link them into larger networks of communication and sharing of resources and knowledge. A role for the Office of ESD?

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