

From the Field

A personal statement by Tony Dorcey

15th September 2009

Being published with chapter by Dorcey, A. H. J. "Sustainability Governance: Surfing the Waves of Transformation." in Mitchell, B. (Ed.) *Resource and Environmental Management in Canada: Addressing Conflict and Uncertainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 528-554. [Revised for Third Edition, 2009].

Sustainability Governance in Canada: Shame and Pride

Canadians can be proud of their early role in developing the principles and practices of sustainability. But at this point in our history we also have to lament our tragic fall from the respect we had earned around the world. Canada is no longer seen as an innovator on the cutting edge of sustainability. Comparative international rankings by environmental, social and economic indicators and policies place Canada shamefully low for such a privileged nation given its natural endowments, material wealth and intellectual capital.

Governance: Problem and Reform

My chapter focuses on critical ways in which Canada's recent dismal performance stems from weaknesses in its participatory governance systems and opportunities for mitigating them. It is based on nearly four decades of experience as an academic, practitioner and citizen. Reform of our participatory governance arrangements has great potential for arresting our downward slide and rebuilding our reputation as a country on the cutting edge of sustainability innovation and achievements. While participatory governance reforms are not all that is required, they have the potential for catalyzing disproportionate change through systemic consequences, as well as reconfiguring understanding, power, influence and incentives. A more comprehensive analysis would also need to include comparable assessments of the roles and performance of other key components of the Canadian system, including legislative bodies and administrative organizations of government, markets, and courts.

Participatory Governance: Needs and Opportunities

There is a huge amount to be gained from more consistent and widespread application of everything learned about how to make participatory processes more productive. It is distressing to see how often participatory processes fall far short of their potential, undermining their contribution to resolving conflicts and reaching agreements and future interest in using participatory governance. Such failures result from not only lack of understanding but also stakeholder gaming. At the same time there is still much to be learned about how to use participatory techniques more productively. Thus, it is essential to employ experimental development with real time evaluations involving the participants.

We have also neglected electoral reform while focusing on adding participatory processes to supplement decision-making by elected representatives. The sustainability governance processes of Canada will not be significantly strengthened without electoral reforms that result in those elected being more responsive and accountable to

constituents. It is deeply concerning to witness the declining rates of voter participation as people increasingly conclude their voting doesn't make a difference. While there is no unambiguous evidence on which alternative electoral system might be better, there is every reason to experiment with those that look promising and test whether better results can be achieved. At the same time, experiments can be conducted using complementary multistakeholder organizations and processes.

Facilitative Leadership

Universities and professional organizations can provide the facilitative leadership urgently needed for advancing sustainability but they also need to commit themselves to more participatory governance. For universities this means greater integration of teaching, research and service and more vigorous pursuit of interdisciplinarity, service learning, community engagement and global citizenship. Professional organizations should become powerful collaborators in these university innovations, and reconstitute their own policies for continuing development of their members' competencies, ethics and certification. Universities and professions have the potential to contribute much more to resolving the sustainability crisis.