

Sustainable democracies

The economic paradigm shift outlined in the third article in this series is necessary, but not sufficient to bring about the transition to a sustainable world. Major changes in the organization of society will also be needed. We hinted at some of this in the last article, mentioning in particular government's role in steering market forces through taxation and subsidization policies. In this article we consider the relationship between government and sustainability.

- Internationally, the Kyoto Protocol contains many of the elements that will be required to deal with the most pressing international ecological problem, global climate change. (unfccc.int/essential_background/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php) It addresses the problem of *scale* by setting international goals, which translate into a cap on world-wide emissions. It *distributes* corresponding emission "rights" in the form of quotas to be met by signatory nations. And it sets up mechanisms whereby markets can *reallocate* these rights through trading. A carbon emissions trading program for power plants and fuel-intensive manufacturers has been established in Europe as a way to meet the Kyoto goals (www.climateark.org/articles/reader.asp?linkid=38806). Much work has also been done on trade within countries, a good example being the tradable "Personal Carbon Allowances" that have been designed to help Great Britain meet its Kyoto objectives (www.fcnp.com/519/peakoil.htm). The United States, of course, has refused to participate in the Kyoto Protocol, but there are many local and citizen initiatives within the U.S., from the US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement (www.ci.seattle.wa.us/mayor/climate) to a Peoples Ratification of the Kyoto Global Warming Treaty (www.climatecrisiscoalition.org).
- At the other end of spectrum are locally designed solutions to the problems of water scarcity. While water scarcity now affects almost every country around the globe, both developed and underdeveloped, solutions are intrinsically more local than solutions to the climate change problem. Privatization, the one-size-fits-all "solution" proposed by neoliberal economists, has failed to deliver promised efficiency and access in third-world countries from Brazil to Bangladesh, as described in Reclaiming Public Water (www.tni.org/books/publicwater.htm). It is being replaced by increased public participation and democratic control. In the United States, the Pacific Institute favors relying on decentralized systems to supply water, replacing the wasteful once-through consumptive use of current systems. Community participation and direction is a critical component of this vision (www.pacinst.org/publications/worlds_water/worlds_water_2002_chapter1.pdf).

The structural impediments to promoting sustainability through government action must be addressed. In the U.S., these are largely the result of a political system that has become increasingly unrepresentative, captured by wealthy corporate entities. The League of course works around the edges of this problem, notably in its attempts to promote campaign finance reform, but has so far failed to address more basic issues. For example, it lacks positions on corporate personhood (www.ratical.org/corporations) and media consolidation under corporate control, two structural issues that are at the heart of

the current democratic deficit in this country. And in considering legislative apportionment, the League must think beyond the single-member, winner-take-all system that leads to more than half of all elections being noncompetitive and disenfranchises a substantial proportion of the electorate. See for example “Full Representation Voting Systems” at www.fairvote.org/?page=378 for a discussion of alternatives.

The League has positions on democracy, on the role of government, on international relations and in other areas that bear on the issues that we will be considering in the state sustainability position study. But we need to re-evaluate these positions carefully in the light of 21st century realities. By and large the existing positions reflect the optimism of the 20th century, when energy from fossil fuels and carbon-based technological advances seemed endless and when our two-party system had not yet converged to an unrepresentative “center” that today severely limits the range of public discourse. Now that we understand that this path is not sustainable, many of these positions need rethinking; otherwise the League is in peril of becoming irrelevant. Can we put the League’s reputation and contributions to civil society back on track by adopting a new and overriding criterion of sustainability?

Questions: What should the League advocate beyond its (poorly advertised) support for the U.S. signing the Kyoto Treaty? Should we be observing the NM Citizen’s Climate Advisory Group deliberations? Are we prepared to take a position on any resulting legislative proposals in 2007? Should LWVABC positions on sprawl and transportation be adopted by consensus by the state so that we can lobby for (or against) legislation at the state level as appropriate? Should the League augment its support for representative democracy to encourage voting systems that produce more representative results? Should we be more aggressive in promoting opportunities for participatory democracy, particularly as we face the state’s water problems? Internally, should the League continue to rely on “experts” to tell us what to think (or at least prescribe the scope of the debate) about topics such as economic development, apportionment, and trade?