



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY
NEW ZEALAND**

**People First: How to make
environmental sustainability something
we can all live with**

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Introduction

This speech grew out of an invitation to talk about issues of environmental sustainability at your conference.

I am aware that there are two speakers in this session and our task is to lay a foundation for discussion. I am looking forward to hearing what you have to say.

As you have heard, I have a background as a sociologist, a local and central government politician over a twenty-one year period and currently occupy the position of Vice Chancellor at Massey University in New Zealand.

I will make use of each of these perspectives during my comments.

The theme of the conference is – “Making liveable, sustainable systems unremarkable”. As a politician I have seen the issue of environmental sustainability move from the fringes of politics to the mainstream.

Those who have promoted the cause of the environment have campaigned for nothing less than a change in the way we live. We have been exhorted to “save the planet” by limiting our impact on the environment. While changes have been made this strategy is yet to succeed.

The urgent need for us to achieve sustainability (a very difficult concept which I will take to mean we are looking for long term not quick fix solutions) is my concern today. But I want to move the focus away from the environment towards the politics of the environment.

Put succinctly, while I applaud environmentalists for putting such issues as pollution, resource depletion, greenhouse gases, climate change and peak oil before us, I am dubious about their ability to realise their ambition to change the way we live.

Indeed, I will go so far as to say that environmentalism as we have known it has become an obstacle to change.

I say this as a person who has been strongly influenced by the cause of the environment. In my household we recycle, compost, carry groceries in reusable bags and bike. When building a house recently, my partner and I tried to ensure environmental principles were applied as much as possible. (NB. For those about to build, it is not easy).

I am delighted to call home a city that hosts the largest windfarm in the country, has pioneered the use of gas from landfills as a source of energy and provides free public transport.

My university is committed to lowering its carbon footprint and including sustainability in its academic programme. We are a leading institution in the area of climate change and sustainable agriculture.

In addition to these personal and professional commitments I agree with the science around greenhouse gases, climate change, global warming and the inconvenient truth that these issues, if not addressed, will probably lead to an unliveable, unsustainable, if not apocalyptic, future.

Fear of the apocalypse is a feature of discussions about the environment. The assumption seems to be that people will respond to being presented with nightmare scenarios.

Prof Peter Barrett from the Antarctic Centre at Victoria University in Wellington New Zealand is a climate change expert and likes to build his presentation of the problem around the 2004 film “The Day After Tomorrow”. If you have seen the film you will know it is based on the assumption that global warming could (will) cause the Greenland ice-shelf to be undermined and collapse into the sea. (Bits of it already have). The fresh water this event releases dilutes salt levels in the oceans dropping temperatures by 13%. The film is largely about a scientist trying to save his son while the world ends in a snow storm.

Having frightened the life out of the enthralled audience, Prof Barrett advises them that the result of all this for New Zealand is the prospect of a climate as experienced in the Carribean. As the audience warms to this idea he notes that unfortunately there will be no one left to come visit us.

So at every level I want to change the way we live to ensure environmental sustainability.

My problem is that I do not see the change needed coming from environmentalism.

I should be clear that while there are many strands of environmentalism, for the purposes of this discussion I am defining environmentalism as a social movement that is concerned with conservation, protection of the environment and the centrality of nature.

My point is that while this approach has raised the issue it cannot supply the answer.

A new approach is needed if we are to make environmental sustainability something we can all live with.

Post-Environmentalism

This approach, if you like, might be called post-environmentalism.

Post-environmentalism argues, at least as I see it, that a concern for conservation, protection and nature has resulted in important advances in our societies. But the problems we are faced with today (the inconvenient truth that we may destroy ourselves) demands that move beyond the traditional environmental agenda. The attention of the “mainstream” national and international community has to be attracted. A coordinated, progressive, planned effort to change how we live is needed.

To put it another way, it is not nature we need to focus on but people.

This view was something of a revelation to me. Through the 80s, 90s and early 000s, I had become very environmentally aware.

Like many New Zealanders, I grew up taking the environment for granted while conceding that it defined a great deal of who I was. There are today some 4.1million New Zealanders living in a country of 270,534 sq kms. Around 67 million British people live in the much the same space.

New Zealanders enjoy clean air, courtesy of the wind, steady rainfall, moderate temperatures, space and a dramatic landscape.

We have thought of ourselves as champions of the environment, ignoring the fact that our circumstances made it easy.

While the environment has long attracted attention as an issue, it was in 1969 that the modern environmental movement got underway with the campaign to save the very beautiful Lake Manapouri from development as a hydro-lake. Some 270,907 New Zealanders signed a petition to save the lake – that was 10% of the population at the time.

From that time on the environmental agenda grew to include pollution, native forests, eradication of pests, fishing, national parks, whaling, energy production, water quality and carbon – to name a few areas. The world's first green party, called the Values Party, was formed in 1974. I nearly voted for it. The Greenpeace ship, Rainbow Warrior, was blown up in Auckland harbour by French government agents in 1985. The Green Party was formed in 1990 and now has nine Members of Parliament out of a one-hundred and twenty. The Resource Management Act was passed in 1991. New Zealand signed the Kyoto Agreement in 1998 and then ratified it in 2002.

As a political activist and then an elected politician from 1986 onward, I was increasingly aware of this agenda and the need to address it. I did so with enthusiasm and was delighted when the Government I was to be part of was elected and placed a strong emphasis on the environment.

It was a source of pride to see the list of environmentally focused policies and actions thicken considerably during those nine years.

But, after a major flood in the region where I live, I began to wonder about the need for a new approach. In March 2004 a one hundred year flood (these seem to come with alarming regularity) occurred in the Manawatu. The region is essentially a flood plain and it disappeared under a lot of water.

The frightening element of this event was that it showed that long established water movement patterns on the plains had changed. As a result, floods occurred where they should not have and the cost was huge. Questions were raised about the viability of farming if this were to happen again. Global warming was suggested as the underlying problem.

By mid-year, having cleaned up, we were looking at what needed to change and decided one of the key issues was farming in the high country. I went with local and central Government officials to talk with famers about selling us their land so it could be reforested to prevent erosion.

I recall standing on the top of the ranges with a farmer, his family and neighbours discussing the fact that he had lost a good deal of his land in other events and this latest deluge had taken 50% of what was left.

“What will you do?” I enquired thinking the answer was obvious. But I was mistaken because he replied he would keep on farming. “But what about the

problems we can see all around us” I said. “How long can you go on farming?”.

“Until it has all gone” he replied. The assembled group nodded sympathetically.

You need to know that the farmer and the others present well aware of the issues surrounding our visit. They were familiar with global warming and climate change. The evidence of a change in the climate was staring them in the face.

Yet they saw no way forward other than to continue with unsustainable practices.

We should not be surprised by this. People still smoke despite warnings about cancer. Farming is not just a job, it is a way of life for a family. They will not give it up easily. And, while they knew about climate change, they were sceptical about the evidence.

I was left wondering what to do by this encounter.

My history suggested the need for protection and conservation but this did not seem to be enough in the face of the scale and urgency of what had happened and could happen again.

I came to the conclusion that a concern for the environment, as if it was divorced from society, from people, was not enough. If we were to have real change our concerns about the environment need to be embedded in our institutions and everyday life.

Others had come to the same conclusion – the seminal post-environmentalist essay dramatically titled “The Death of Environmentalism: Global

Warming and politics in a Post-Environmental World” was published by Ted Nordhauser and Michael Shellenberger in the same year. I have only been introduced to this work over the past year and have found it very helpful.

Nordhauser and Shellenberger argue that, “ if we are to achieve meaningful action on global warming we can no longer limit our politics to those things that are customarily defined as “environmental.”

They make the point that if we are concerned about asthma why would we focus on diesel bus pollution but not on health care? Why focus on parks but not schools? Why smokestacks but not crime? We do this, they say, because health care and schools and crime are not customarily defined as part of “the environment” where as the air and parks and smokestacks are.

Turning to global warming they point out that China this year will emit more greenhouse gases than the United States. The strategy being pursued by environmentalists — both “mainstream” and “grassroots” — is to emphasize to the Chinese people and government the perils of global warming.

Why the insistence on “fighting global warming” rather than helping China to prosper — perhaps in a way that also creates a clean energy revolution?

Turning to the impact of climate change on the poor they argue that the best protection for poor people against extreme weather, droughts, and food shortages is development. If we are so concerned about poor people in places like India and Bangladesh, shouldn’t we be as focused on economic development as emissions reductions?

Without consciously taking a post-environmentalist position, the Government I was a part of began to change as well. In 2007 the then Prime Minister Helen Clark delivered a speech in Washington DC that began to broaden the traditional agenda.

The speech identified New Zealand as a nation that had grown through innovation and went on to set out a comprehensive agenda not just for change but for transformation. The speech differed from the usual environmental speech by identifying the issues positively as opportunities.

Clark defined New Zealand as intent on being the “first truly sustainable nation”. She set out bold goals for lowering New Zealand’s carbon footprint, meeting 96% of energy needs from renewable resources, introducing bio-fuels, modernising the transport fleet, increasing public transport, changing land-use patterns, reforesting high country, insulating houses, encouraging changes in everyday behaviour through incentives, minimising waste and requiring the public service to change their procurement practices.

It was this agenda that allowed me a year later, as Minister of Science, Research and Technology, to say in a speech during a visit to the United States that New Zealand was “first to see the light” when it came to living sustainable. We were a “beacon on the hill” as one commentator put it.

The problem with speeches is that they have to be followed through. And in the cold light of day, the Government I was part of found it difficult to convince enough people to support this comprehensive agenda.

While we had tried to approach the issues positively we lacked the tools to bring about change. And we were still falling into the practice of wanting people to fully understand environmental and climate change issues. We wanted them to change for the “right” reasons when we should have been content to get change. What we should have done was embed that agenda in the concerns that people face in everyday life. To take one example, time spent commuting is a much better driver of change for most people than concern about pollution. If they changed their behaviour to avoid waiting in traffic, that should have been enough.

The Government I was a member of stayed in power for a long time by New Zealand standards – nine years. For most of that time it advanced the environmental agenda of conservation and protection very successfully.

The shift towards what I have labelled a post-environmentalist agenda in 2007 came toward the end of its time and the new government has not entirely followed suit.

There has been action on insulation and more talk about sustainable farming practices. But there is also a Parliamentary Select Committee examining evidence for global warming on the assumption that the science is faulty, a review of the Resource Management Act, a reworking of the Emissions Trading Scheme, cancellation of an EnviroSchools programme and a sense that the economy must take precedence over the environment. There are dark warnings of costs being imposed on households.

The new Government has made it clear that in the context of global recession, global warming and our response to it can take a back seat. They act this way because they are still thinking in environmentalist terms of conservation and protection, which they see as a cost and therefore of a lower priority.

The notion that the economic and environmental crises are converging and that the transformation of one may go hand in hand with the other is lost. The argument that instead of seeing environmental issues as limiting what can be done, as opposed to opening up new opportunities, is also lost. New Zealand is no longer determined to lead change. It will be at best a “fast adopter”.

This is not because the current government is unaware of the issues. It is just that they do not see them as anything other than a problem that has to be dealt with.

What this story has told me is that we need a better politics of change around environment issues. In other words we must understand what we need to do to turn our aspirations into reality.

The Politics of Climate Change and Systems

Here is where we might turn specifically to the purpose of this conference. In the material sent to me, the concern is raised that systems are seldom talked about when we confront issues like sustainability. I would suggest this is our starting point.

It is only if we change our social and economic systems that sustainability can be something we will be able to live with.

The question is how do we do that?

The answer, as Anthony Giddens argues in his most recent book, is that we need a politics of climate change. We need to move beyond analysis of the problem to an analysis of what it will take to get change.

This will involve the market, as in the case of an Emissions Trading Scheme, and it will involve the actions of individual businesses.

However, this strategy can only take us so far if business is to stay in business. An example of the limits of a market solution can be found in New Zealand's attempt to introduce bio-fuels. The policy was to ensure that 3.4% of fuels available at the pump by 2012 would be bio-fuels. Production immediately grew in anticipation of the market forming.

The policy was dropped a few months ago leading to industry pointing out that without a mandatory bio-fuels sales obligation, as it was called, the industry could not get off the ground.

Individual businesses and organisations have a role. Everything we do makes a difference so it is to be applauded when business sets out to be carbon neutral or make some other contribution. This is exactly why Massey University is seeking to lower its carbon footprint.

But we cannot rely on this trend to take us very far. During a recent speech in New Zealand, leading financial journalist Rod Oram noted that 69% of the world's largest businesses will be making money from

climate change this year – but he struggled to think of one New Zealand firm. This despite New Zealand having developed a sense of itself as a “clean and green environmental leader”.

Civil society will have a role. It has been the actions of individuals and NGOs that put the environment on the agenda. This will not and should not stop.

But once again there is a limit to what civil society can achieve through protest, direct action, alternative lifestyles and petitions unless the government eventually takes up the cause.

Whatever good has been done it is simply not enough. We need to think through a more comprehensive and coherent approach.

It might be suggested that such an approach can be found by turning to the Greens. As much as I applaud their aspirations I am not so sure.

The problem is that the Green movement is rooted in a dislike of modern industrial societies. As a result they have a lot to say about the problem but what they say about the solution is not listened to by many people. I noted earlier that the Greens started as the Values Party in New Zealand in 1974. Over a period of three decades the share of the Green vote has averaged 6%. Without proportional representation, something I campaigned in favour of, the Greens would not be in Parliament at all because they are unable to win constituency seats.

To put it bluntly not enough people can see how to live like a Green. And most do not want what they do see.

The reasons for this are probably too complex to deal with fully in the time available today, but I think the concept of post-materialism has a lot to offer.

Post-materialism refers to behaviours that occur when people feel their basic needs are being met. They, as Maslow instructs us, focus on “higher order issues” like fulfilment and purpose.

We can see this in practical terms if we turn to something like the work of New Zealand’s Growth and Innovation Board (GIAB) whose surveys show that New Zealanders value quality of life, quality of education and the environment ahead of all else – including higher incomes. But if we think this means people will accept a lower standard of living in favour of the environment we misunderstand. In practice they appear to want both.

In fact they value these “higher order” issues precisely because they believe the basics are taken care of.

This understanding is often forgotten in the debate about environmental sustainability. It is assumed that people just need to better understand how bad the situation is and they will respond. This is why fear of the problem is so prominent and why words like stop, restrict, prevent, conserve and limits are so often used. If the world is in grave danger what else is there to do but tell people - they will get the point and agree to dramatically reduce their aspirations to protect the environment. They will not; at least not enough of them will.

In particular, a majority are not about to return to “nature” – whatever shape or form that might take. In this they are probably right. Humans have been modifying nature for so long, the issues we face are not about a return to “the garden”, they are about working out a new way to live. And this requires the application of science, technology and innovation.

Which returns me to the question of a politics that will lead to changes in our economy and society.

Let’s start with the problem again. We know we are facing catastrophic problems if we do not change our society. These are not just the older issues of pollution that might addressed by protection, conservation and a concern for nature.

Our world could come to an end and we have the evidence to prove it.

This is an unusual situation. We do not usually have such a clear idea of the future. Change of this magnitude usually unfolds and people react. In the case of the environmental challenges we have to plan for it.

I stress the word plan because many people assume that planning is either bad or impossible. But in the face of the challenges we face this is the only way forward and if we do not do it with some haste it will be too late.

In New Zealand, particularly since the economic revolution of the mid-80’s, the market and not planning has been seen as the central organising principle for society. But planning in one form or another has been going on and there are many

lessons to be learnt at the central, regional and local levels as to what works and what does not. Identifying what we have learnt is a priority. This may be the priority for a conference on systems.

Of course, emphasising planning means a large role for government and the state – something many people worry about.

Perhaps then it is a fortunate coincidence that as we struggle with an issue like global warming we are witnessing the return of the state in response to the world economic crisis.

In the face of massive market failure the state is back. It is recognised that only the state has the reach and the power to do something about the economic problems we face. And only the state has the capacity (and hopefully capability) to implement a new kind of economy that will bring to a halt the increasingly destructive boom bust cycle that we have been experiencing.

Indeed people have demanded that the state take a leadership role in the economy again because they can see that the only hope they have for security will come from the state.

There are implications here for our approach to environmental sustainability. The market cannot address this issue adequately. This is a crisis that only governments and states can deal with.

I keep mentioning governments because not enough people will listen to the need for change until a clear alternative to the way we live now is spelt out. This cannot be a partial vision. It must cover the way

people work, play, live and learn. The agenda has to include areas not usually considered environmental. People may then be able to see a way forward that is liveable.

Governments can and should do this by ensuring people understand the problem (something which has fallen away in the face of the economic crisis) and the possible future. Unless people can grasp the alternative to the way they live now they not only will not change they cannot change.

This has to be, as Nordhauser and Shellenberger argue, a compelling vision not about limits but possibilities, not about deficits and regulation but investment and assets, not about insecurity but affluence.

And having secured widespread support for a compelling vision it is governments and the state that must also put in place institutions that can implement policies. Institutions last beyond governments and provide the continuity real change requires.

If it was difficult to see how this might be done some years ago, it is less so now.

The convergence of the economic and environmental crises we face creates an unprecedented opportunity. Our economic crisis is not cyclical, it is structural. By this I mean the crisis is caused by the structure of the economy that has led to a series of speculative bubbles which eventually have to burst. In New Zealand that bubble was housing and it is about to take off again.

As the OECD has indicated, our response to the crisis cannot be a matter of waiting to return to business as usual. Business as usual got us into this mess. We need a new kind of economy and this offers the opportunity to take the cause of environmental sustainability forward.

Governments can lead this by investing in the key drivers of change and innovation – science, new technologies and education. Not just in areas that are directly associated with the environment but across all areas. A liveable future relies on innovation in all areas.

And just as governments are underwriting markets and business to ride out the economic storm they must also underwrite the changes needed to create an environmentally sustainable world.

Governments must also make it possible for people to live everyday lives in sustainable ways. Subsidies for housing insulation is one way this is happening in New Zealand. Many people simply cannot afford to insulate but want to lower their energy costs. Subsidies make it possible to save money while encouraging people to live more energy efficient lives.

There is see a key role for education. The New Zealand school curriculum currently includes a great deal on the environment. But for the most part it treats the environment as something distinct that we have to look after. This partial approach reduces our ability to bring about change. Young people need to be encouraged to think about change on a much broader front.

The same needs to happen at universities where the “greening” of the curriculum is gaining momentum. Once again change across a broader front is needed.

We must also avoid being Polyannas when it comes to the level of change needed. I think a great deal can be accomplished by positive means, but there will be a need to regulate and pass laws.

The obvious riposte to my argument in favour of government and state led change is that they are not doing the job now and politicians are unlikely to put popularity ahead of sustainability.

I understand this argument but do not accept that it has to be true. It will be true while politicians work within an environmental framework. They can win support for saving whales or creating a reserve but they cannot convince enough people to make saving the planet the organising principle for everyday life.

It need not be true if they shift focus to a post-environmental agenda that is inclusive and offers new possibilities as opposed to restriction will they gain traction.

Let me bring my comments to a close.

I will leave you with what we have achieved so far. The first graph shows the trend in carbon emissions. The second shows where the emissions are coming from. Yes we have made a difference through waste reduction but the big drivers of carbon go on.

It is not enough.

If we want to create a liveable sustainable world we are going to have to plan for it. And this means implementing a change to the social and economic system we live in.

Remember, if the worst happens the planet will go on – it has been through an ice age before. It is people who will disappear.

If I appear to have answers to how all of this will work I do not. But a conference like this may - I wish you well with the discussion that will follow.