

# Freedom Matters

## A Weekly Newsletter

Dane County, Wisconsin

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We are a free people in a republic, under a constitution which limits the powers of government to those necessary to secure the unalienable rights of each person to their life, liberty and property. Yet, when a legislature is in session, no one's life, liberty or property is safe. It's the curse of a democracy. That's why we have a republic instead. *Freedom Matters* dedicates itself to the fight to restore our republic. Most of the press and courts fail to do so. They've forgotten that freedom matters.

### Sustainable Development Is Unsustainable. Part 3. Deconstruction.

by Bob Bowman

As reviewed last issue, the strong, or absolutist, definition of Sustainable Development (aka "smart growth") was found morally indefensible and totally impractical (so Wilfred Beckerman claims). Its proponents then tried to rescue it by deconstructing it. They shifted to a weak definition, which definition allowed exhaustion of certain resources if mitigated by adequate compensation in terms of other resources.

So, what constitutes "adequate" compensation? The answer the proponents gave, to paraphrase Beckerman, was to turn sustainable development into "**sustainable welfare**." In other words, the substituted resources (the mitigation) had to be such as to sustain human welfare, not to decrease it. Fauchaux, Pearce & Proops, 1996) are quoted in this regard: "*non-negative change in economic welfare per capita becomes the intertemporal equity objective.*" (Translation: There will be no decrease in the economic welfare per capita available to future generations, in order to assure that their resources will equal ours.)

Well, says Beckerman, that changes the goal from one of maintaining the stock of natural capital to one of maintaining the stock of well-being. That, he says, throws out non-welfarist values. It thus becomes **no different** than the classical economist's goal of maximizing human welfare via economics; i.e., the weak definition throws the baby out with the bathwater.

So, other leftists tried other tricks. They still thought that conventional economic growth was unsustainable or unethical, and had to be replaced. But, the strong definition of sustainable development was also unsustainable and unethical, and the weak definition was no different than conventional economics. Hence, leftists gave up trying to find a rational definition of sustainable development, and **simply enumerated** a ragbag of desirable objectives as constituting sustainable development.

It will come as no surprise to the readers of *Freedom Matters* that Clinton was one who thus abandoned principles and went for goodies. He used executive orders as a way to implement U.N. Agenda 21, since the Senate refused to ratify the treaty. Thus, in 1993, he set up the **President's Council on Sustainable Development**. Then, to implement its recommendations, he set up in 1996 an **Interagency Working Group on Sustainable Development**. The latter group produced a laundry list of "worthy objectives", none of which they tied analytically to the basic idea of sustainable development.

Lafferty & Meadowcroft (2000) likewise spurned an analytical basis for sustainable development; they stated their laundry

list thus: "*promoting human welfare; satisfying basic needs; protecting the environment; considering the fate of future generations; achieving equity between rich and poor; and participating on a broad basis in development decision making. While these points may appear vague, they are not without substance.*" [as quoted by Beckerman]

The fundamental flaw of sustainable development is that it cannot be analytical if it is not quantifiable. Beckerman cites an "important attempt" to quantify it by a group who set out to devise an *environmental sustainability index* (ESI). This group, experts at Yale & Columbia Universities, rationally identified five dynamic systems as involved in environmental sustainability. However, their ESI was **not** tied to those five systems. Their index was based on an arbitrary set of 67 variables grouped into 22 "core indicators" and then reduced to an equally-weighted arithmetic mean of this number soup, to get the ESI. Lacking an underlying theory, that index is not science. It is nonsense.

How the mighty have fallen! **Sustainable development** came out of an analytical claim of doom, based on Malthusian theory. With the intellectual failure of that analysis, it has now deconstructed into a loose pile of vague political goals.

As Beckerman notes, most of us are in favor of improving human wellbeing. Our problem is to prioritize, and to calculate the necessary trade-offs in the face of conflicting goals or of limitations imposed by limited resources. Not only has "sustainable development" lost its analytical promise by which to do this, it has led to an absolutist fanaticism, that wastes vast resources on boondoggles like commuter rail, or on protecting every species from extinction without any assessing of the environmental impact of doing so, or on resorting to terrorism to prevent economic development. **Why this resort to fanaticism?**

More, next issue.

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