

Transformation Nation: Responding to Climate Change

Morgan's notes for "From Transition to Transformation: Sustainable Development for Everyone"

I realised yesterday when I was preparing my notes that following Sir John Houghton and Mark Lynas I would have a hard time saying anything interesting about the science of climate change, so I won't try! But I will attempting to frame sustainable development as the response to climate change and in so doing describe the work and role of Cynnal Cymru.

I'm also going to say rather less than I normally do about the rural environment, given the speakers that follow me. Needless to say though, almost all of what I say is relevant in Machynleeth as it is in Cardiff or Caernarfon.

Recent events

This week started with 3 significant announcements and 2 big events, seemingly unconnected

- a new plastic recycling plant is to open on Deeside: will handle 50% of UK's plastic bottles
- new Pembrokeshire National Park guidance on low-impact housing allows Brithdir Mawr to continue
- protesters acquitted over Kingsnorth protest:
- Lehman's collapse and Merrill Lynch taken over, AIG bailed out, HBOS bought out by Lloyds
- arctic ice continues to disappear at an alarming rate

The first reflects years of change in public policy and consumer behaviour and demonstrates the commercial value of using resources more efficiently

- milk and other soft drink bottles that might otherwise have gone to landfill or been exported, will be recycled into new plastic at the plant, which was supported by £1m funding from the Welsh Assembly

- and real opportunities for Wales in hosting “green” businesses

The second, Pembrokeshire National Park and Brithdir Mawr, is the result of the quiet determination of a group of people trying to live sustainably: the only people in Wales living close to the fair-earth-share of natural resources. Their campaign changed the stubborn bureaucracy which was only concerned with “preserving the status quo” in the face of a rapidly changing world

Pity it didn't rub off on Pembrokeshire Council who last week refused planning permission for the Lammas development!

Testing out some of the solutions and understanding the consequences should be supported, particularly in the rural environment which is so important to Wales and where our natural capital will become increasingly valuable

Thirdly the power of protest presents serious challenge to the Government's energy policy

My own personal story for what its worth is that of a direct action protester turned lobbyist.....choosing now to work within the political system for change... but I admit to celebrating the success of the Greenpeace protesters at Kingsnorth and in the courts

The acquittal is the first case where preventing property damage from climate change has been used as part of a 'lawful excuse' defence in court.

- Ffos-y-Fran is Wales' Kingsnorth: it will be one of the largest coal mines in the history of Wales. No compensation or relocation has been offered to those affected by the scheme

- 10.8 million tonnes of coal will be mined over the lifetime of the project, which when burnt at Aberthaw will release over 30 million tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere.

Fourthly – is the meltdown in the financial markets. Is it the precursor to a global collapse of capitalism and liberal economics? Or will the free market find a new equilibrium? Either way I fear the fall-out will distract from a weakened our response to climate change, rather than usher in a new order

Are we in making any connections between the loss of financial capital and the continuing decline of natural capital?

- can markets even ascertain financial asset value, let alone the value of natural capital

Do we need an alternative economic model that allows us be resilient to economic shocks and to environmental changes?

Cynnal Cymru thinks governments should be discussing these issues

Fifth – arctic ice decline reminds us of the urgency of the challenge ahead.

On September 12, 2008 sea ice extent dropped to 4.52 million square kilometers (1.74 million square miles). The 2008 minimum is the second-lowest recorded, and is 2/3 of the 1979 to 2000 average minimum.

How should we respond to this? Climate change throws up all sorts of dilemmas.....

Should we rely on governments to act or is it down to individual behaviours?

Should we bypass governments and participative democracy and go direct to technology to solve the problem

- or go for a global deal on climate?

- Or build resilient communities locally

- or all of these?

Cynnal Cymru believes we should be addressing the economic causes of climate change, and the social consequences, as well as the environmental impacts

Transformation Nation

Cynnal Cymru's report, published today, seeks to interpret all the above in the Welsh context, and synthesise a Welsh response.

Sustainable Development has slid down the political agenda and is treated by many in government as just one other policy silo. Cynnal Cymru believes not only that it is the best response to climate change but that it should be the overarching framework for all government policy. In 2005, Cynnal Cymru began a programme of work to help the Welsh Assembly Government produce an exemplary Sustainable Development Scheme for 2008 and beyond.

Over three years we have gathered evidence from a wide range of stakeholders at events including:

Regional workshops between 2005 - 2007;

A Cynnal Cymru Board-hosted conference in July 2007, Cardiff;

Three public debates on climate change;

A survey of the general public at the Royal Welsh Show in 2007 on how easy (or difficult) it is to live sustainably in Wales;

Economists' Reference Group meetings in 2005 and 2007;

A workshop on the Wales Spatial Plan in 2008

..... and many other strands of work

The report which we're launching today brings together the views and ideas gathered at those events to inform the agenda. The evidence gathered demonstrates a belief that a radical transformation is needed in how we think and act in Wales to achieve sustainable development. The report's title, 'Transformation Nation', has been chosen to reflect the drastic nature of the changes now required.

Our research tells us that.....

Enthusiasm and goodwill towards sustainable development is widespread in Wales. We have found exciting examples of good practice. However, the best examples are happening within small, isolated groups – and so their learning is not always shared or supported. Consequently, there is a growing gap between the action that in addressing climate change. Additionally, there has only been very limited progress in aligning government policy and programmes with the delivery of sustainable development.

What we need to do.....

The need for real action grows ever more urgent. Reducing our global impact and tackling climate change and social justice must be at the forefront of the sustainable development agenda. A sustainable and more localised economy is absolutely essential, and it is to the credit of Jane Davidson and her officials that these will be the central focus of the new sustainable development scheme. But such transformational change – moving in no more than 20 years to truly living within

natural limits, respecting the natural environment as our life support system – is a challenge facing every level of society

How we're going to do it.....

The journey through the transformation from where we are now to where we want to be, will not be easy. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says that, to avoid serious climate change, we need to have a radical systems change within five years. The SD Scheme will last four years. Will we have reached where we need to be at the end of that period?

We have until 2012 to have a fully-developed plan that will deliver the objective of 80% carbon reduction by 2030. This will require strong leadership at national, regional and local levels. Capacity (the know-how, skills and space to act) must be developed, alongside systems that will embed sustainable development into all our policies and programmes.

Concerned citizens of Wales have ideas and commitment. However, this needs to be brought together in a more structured way if we are going to make the most of peoples' experiences and knowledge, and critically, ensure that there can be collective learning and change. The Cynnal Cymru network provides this opportunity but it also needs to become more embedded in Government thinking and action.

We need to work with the private sector to achieve the maximum public benefit – the plastic recycling plant planned for Deeside is an example of this. The public sector can lead in other areas such as local food procurement and public transport. We believe that we can catalyse a step-change towards SD in Wales if all the relevant stakeholders work together to make this change happen. Collective and collaborative thinking, and action, is a true possibility in a country the size of Wales. A new SD Scheme, drawing out these opportunities, would be the vehicle for achieving “One Planet Wales”

The Role of Cynnal Cymru

Cynnal Cymru was established as

a catalyst for change

a think tank acting as a focal point for expertise and the building of knowledge and consensus

a provider of strategic advice

an advocate for the promotion & understanding of sustainable development

a disseminator and communicator of best practice and new ideas.

We have striven to maintain that balance to this day, through a programme of engagement with networks, policy analysis and expert commentary, and effective communication and dissemination. WAG have generously funded the engagement and communication roles, directing resources towards website development, public outreach and encouraging sustainable lifestyles. WAG is also funding our Policy Adviser role this year, to enable us to crystallise the views of our members and network and produce targeted responses which help Government implement and develop the SD Scheme, making practical and achievable suggestions and contributions.

However it is right that civil society in Wales should also seek to develop policy and new thinking as well, independent of the Government's agenda: this is the Transformation Nation programme. Government should support this process as being good for the development of participatory democracy. It is our view that Government should be willing to fund these functions because they signal emerging concerns and trends, even when they have uncomfortable implications for current policy agendas.

Also, it is only by stepping outside the Government's comfort zone, where a myriad of conflicting pressures and priorities create a risk-averse approach, that Cynnal Cymru can stimulate the public dialogue that can create and prove the political space, making the necessary bold and radical leadership less risky, better informed and popularly palatable.

In this context, being seen to be part of increasingly effective civil society in Wales, can Cynnal Cymru be the catalyst which changes public attitudes and reinforces the legitimacy of the government's

sustainable development aspirations. And given that we seek to inform the debate around public policy in Wales, we welcome the partnership with IWA in putting on this conference today.

Some difficult issues

There are those who suggest that Governments are lagging behind, and that consumers were ready to make sustainable choices if only they were given the opportunity. As the SDC concluded in its "I will if you will" report, eliminating unsustainable choices is as important as incentivising sustainable.

Moving to a sustainable economy must be a collective, mass, popular project backed by government, involving people whose behaviour is driven by many different motivations and values.

While agreeing that Governments are risk averse, I don't agree that the public at large are ready and waiting for the Government to throw off the shackles that bind them as individuals to their unsustainable lifestyles. The Government is risk averse because it knows that the real choices are difficult and unpopular. I think that Governments know and accept the sustainability challenge: certainly the Welsh Government does, with the exception of a few contrarian economic advisers. Sure, a few percent of the population are striving to make lifestyle changes on the scale that is required – including many of us here, despite many inconveniences. But for the majority of the population – despite an increase in recycling, in sales of organic and fairtrade goods, the trends are for relentless increase in consumerism, in air-miles and energy use in the home.

The Transition Towns/Local Economy movement is an inspiration. But it seems to me that this is not enough if we don't also use our knowledge and influence to also work in the mainstream to transform the rest of society. Many attempts have been made since the 1960s to work out alternative lifestyles, but the world outside has carried on regardless. The Transition Towns movement, like Planed, Sustainable Wales, Ymlaen Ceredigion, Ecodyfi and all the groups that went before, are at their most effective when they give a perspective on, and reach out to, the deeply unsustainable society at large. We must aim for sustainable development for everyone, not just ourselves.

Our challenge therefore is to change the terms of the public debate around sustainable development, and so far we are failing: we have yet to convince the public that radical change is needed. Are people in Wales too comfortable, living away from the climate danger zone, insulated from the impacts of their lifestyles? Are people making the connection between the collapse of financial institutions, the continuing ethic of putting private wealth before the common good and the erosion of natural capital that threatens our future? The New Economics Foundation, the Sustainable Development Commission and the Green party are amongst the groups that are, and we need to bring that debate into Welsh civil society.

Cynnal Cymru is greatly expanding its communications effort and network building in the year ahead. We must redouble our efforts and make political space for Governments to explain, educate and act. Governments increasingly feel they cannot lead: they can only manage and respond to events.

The challenges and opportunities of sustainable development are to show why individual and collective behaviour change is needed to stop dangerous climate change, how biodiversity and ecosystem function must be enhanced to cope with it, how we protect the poorest people on earth from the worst impacts of it, and how here in Wales the distinctiveness and resilience of our local communities can be ensured in the face of global trends working in the opposite direction. But also, how much more enjoyable and healthy a more sustainable way of life can be!

But expecting mass behaviour change simply by information and exhortation is doomed to failure. As Nick Pigeon of Cardiff University says, attitude change more often follows government interventions (e.g. legislation to force change – as with seat belts, smoking in pubs etc). Communication cannot be seen to stand alone.

Legislation and enforcement on their own are not enough: Cynnal Cymru's surveys have shown that in many parts of Wales sustainable living is difficult or even impossible. The infrastructure and services simply aren't there, in transport, food and many other areas. We can help the Government support or provide the services that people need to make sustainable choices.

Technological changes won't be enough on their own. The Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, Professor Sir John Lawton says that technological improvements alone will not be enough to deliver the scale of emissions reductions we need to see from the transport sector. "Behaviour change is vital", he stresses, "and that means all of us travelling less far, in more energy efficient ways and at slower speeds". If Prof. Nick Pigeon is correct, we will only adopt different behaviours if the Government makes us do so. That seems to be an arena into which most governments are unwilling to go.

There is also a live debate going on about the extent to which climate change messages should be alarmist (danger is people switch off, and become fatalistic, as it looks too big a problem for them to tackle) or too simple (small steps that people can take, like switching off light bulbs, which many feel trivialises the issue). This is a dilemma for cc communication that is not easily resolved.

But by working together across sectors, in the way that Cynnal Cynnal strives to do, not only can we make sustainable development something that involves everyone, it can also be something that benefits everyone. At present, despite the internet and instant communications, we are talking to our own specialist community, be they communities of business, the public sector or the sustainability movement. That's why I welcome the interest shown in this hugely important area of public policy by the Institute of Welsh Affairs.

Conclusions

I started with five examples of global and local events which are helping to shape the world in which we live. All five of these events should inform the debate about sustainable development in Wales that Cynnal Cymru seeks to lead on, and are legitimate issues for the IWA in its excellent promotion of dialogue on public policy. Investment from business, Government support for innovation, sustainable living, protest and dissent, questioning of orthodoxies and a robust base in scientific evidence are all essential if we are to move towards a more sustainable Wales.

In short, we need a transformation. We need to scale up the work being done locally in Transition Towns and local economy groups to a project of national transformation. We must work locally in our communities and communicate the successes abroad. We must protest, but also engage with governments and business. WE must challenge the status quo and the current seeming mad paradigms of economics, as the Transition Towns initiatives are doing.

There are many excellent examples of sustainable development around Wales, and many of you are the leaders. Cynnal Cymru can bring people together, and if you aren't members please join us, have a say in the way we work and make your voice heard. Lets move forward together so that we have sustainable development for everyone.