Who is in charge here?

Governance for sustainable development in a complex world*

This paper explores one of the major challenges associated with governance for sustainable development: managing change in a context where power is distributed across diverse societal subsystems and among many societal actors. The discussion is divided into four parts. The first examines the idea of ‘governance for sustainable development’. The second considers the diffusion of power in modern societies. The third explores the extent to which this constitutes a problem for sustainable development. And the final section advances some approaches to governing for sustainable development in a radically ‘decentred’ societal context.

1. Governance for sustainable development

In the most straightforward sense, ‘governance for sustainable development’ refers to processes of socio-political governance oriented towards the attainment of sustainable development. It encompasses public debate, political decision-making, policy formation and implementation, and complex interactions among public authorities, private business and civil society – *in so far as these relate to steering societal development along more sustainable lines* (Meadowcroft, 2005).

Since it was brought to international attention by the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, ‘sustainable development’ has been linked with a series of normative ideas including: protection of environment, particularly the essential life support functions of the global ecosphere; promotion of human welfare, especially the urgent development needs of the poor; concern for the well being of future generations; and public participation in environment and development decision making. It is often spoken about in terms of achieving an
appropriate balance between three ‘pillars’ – the environment, economy, and society. Basically, it is about reorienting the development trajectory so that genuine societal advance can be sustained.

Sustainable development is a complex and contested concept, and despite the pages of ‘consensus documents’ adopted by international agencies and conferences, there remain many different perspectives on what it entails and the scale of reforms required to give it force. In academic circles there have been recurrent debates about whether it represents a rigorous philosophical or economic concept, and the difficulty of translating it into specific policy prescriptions. Although such debates have generated insights, they have often missed the critical political point that this concept was not formulated as part of the technical vocabulary of social science, or as an operational rule that would allow policy outputs to be automatically read off from a list of situational inputs. Rather it was designed as a normative point of reference for environment and development policy making (Lafferty, 1996; Jacobs, 1999) Like other political concepts -- such as ‘liberty’, ‘democracy’ and ‘justice’ -- it helps to frame and focus debate, while being open to constant interrogation and re-interpretation.

Turning now to ‘governance’, it is worth noting that the term is not new to the political lexicon. But over the past twenty years it has increasingly found favour in discussion of the changing responsibilities of public authorities, and the varied ways order is generated in modern society. Contemporary usage has been shaped by debates about ‘good governance’ that emerged in international development circles in the late 1980s (World Bank, 1991; DAC-OECD, 1993). Although the formulations used by specific international bodies differ, ‘governance’ is today generally understood to refer to practices through which societies are governed, and ‘good governance’ is associated with a diverse array of criteria including: effectiveness and efficiency, the
rule of law, participation, accountability, transparency, respect for human rights, the absence of corruption, toleration of difference, and gender equity (UNDP, 1997; Plumptre and Graham, 1999).

Within political science interest in ‘governance’ has been linked with attempts to understand changing patterns of state/societal interaction. Some theorists have associated ‘governance’ with new forms of socio/political interaction. Thus Rhodes defined ‘governance’ in terms of ‘self-organising inter-organisational networks’ that constitute ‘an alternative to, not a hybrid of, markets and hierarchies’ (Rhodes, 1996, p. 659). In a similar vein, Jessop has spoken of ‘governance’ as a form of social co-ordination based on ‘dialogic rationality’, where goals are ‘modified in and through ongoing negotiation and reflection’ (Jessop, 2000, p. 17).

In contrast, others have invoked governance as a more general term that embraces the different ways in which co-ordination is achieved. Kooiman describes ‘social-political governance’ as ‘arrangements in which public as well as private actors aim at solving societal problems’ (Kooiman, 2000). ‘Diversity’, ‘complexity’, and ‘dynamics’ are understood as the outstanding features of modern society, and they impel the development of more varied governance practices involving hybrids of three basic governing forms – ‘self-governance’, ‘co-governance’ and ‘hierarchical governance’ (Kooiman, 2003). A similarly open textured notion of ‘governance’ is employed by Pierre and Peters, who relate it both to institutional structures and interactive processes (Pierre and Peters, 2000).

How do such broad debates about ‘governance’ relate to sustainable development? With respect to the notion of ‘good governance’, one might say that concern with sustainable development is one element of what it means to practice ‘good governance’. Sustainable development is an internationally recognised goal which governments (and other organisations with governance responsibilities) ought to pursue. On the other hand, one could argue that ‘good
governance’ is necessary in order to achieve sustainable development. It was in this vein that the Introduction to the ‘Plan of Implementation’ adopted at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development declared: ‘Good governance within each country and at the international level is essential for sustainable development’ (WSSD, 2002, p. 8).

Yet neither formulation takes one very far. The first is simply an assertion that ‘good governance’ embraces all internationally legitimated norms, while the second presumably holds true for any substantive societal end – for without ‘good governance’ how can we be sure to attain desirable social goals? Of course, it is true that to the extent that debates about ‘good governance’ have established the sorts of governing practices that encourage sound development, then these are also relevant for sustainable development. But such a general linkage fails to direct attention to the specificity of the challenge of sustainable development.

With respect to debates in political science it is the wider, rather than the narrower, usage of ‘governance’ cited above that can most fruitfully be linked with sustainable development: for our interest is in the entirety of governance processes and mechanisms as they may be adapted to promote this social aim. And many insights from existing governance literatures are relevant to ‘governance for sustainable development’: for example, discussions of emerging mechanisms of global rule, shifts in the structure and functions the state, and inter-actions among forms of ‘self’, ‘co’ and ‘hierarchical’ governance.

All this may have left the reader with the impression that ‘governance for sustainable development’ is impossibly broad. After all, we are dealing with an overarching social objective that embraces economic, social and environmental dimensions. Employment policy, fiscal management, the health care system, pension arrangements, housing policy, immigration law, the fight against crime, the management of natural resources – all have some bearing on sustainable
development. And most of these are reflected in the indicator sets governments are elaborating to track sustainable development (DEFRA, 2005). Does it follow that governance in every social domain should now be understood as subsidiary to some all-encompassing process of ‘governance for sustainable development’? Certainly it can be viewed this way. But a more promising approach emphasises the specific ‘value added’ of the concept of sustainable development – the distinctive light which this perspective can shed on various areas of societal governance, and the particular adjustments that are necessary to orient social development along more sustainable lines. On this reading, ‘governance for sustainable development’ is primarily associated with issues central to the sustainability problematic. Three tasks stand out: (1) the identification and management of critical threats to sustainability; (2) the integration of sustainability into general practices of governance; and (3) the organization of collective reflection and decision with respect to reconciling social priorities and orienting the overall development trajectory. Here the emphasis is not so much on the totality of socio/political governance, as on the reform of that totality in light of sustainable development.

A number of recent studies have begun to explore explicitly the issue of governance for sustainable development (OECD, 2002a; OECD, 2002b; Lafferty, 2005; Kemp, Parto and Gibson, 2005), and it is worth noting two important points that can be distilled from this work: one relates to the scale of the necessary social transformation, and the other to the character of the implied steering logic.

First, there is little doubt that sustainable development represents an ambitious agenda for societal change. To reconcile continued economic and social improvement with the preservation of global ecological systems, will require a dramatic ‘decoupling’ of economic activity from environmental loading (OECD, 2001). In global terms the significance of this ‘decoupling’ is
particularly evident with respect to climate change, where recent scientific assessments suggest that stabilisation of the climate system will eventually require a decline in global carbon dioxide emissions to a small fraction of current levels (IPCC, 2001; Schellnhuber, 2006). But threats to long term ecological integrity are manifest in many other areas including water use, the management of forests and fisheries, patterns of land utilisation, chemical releases, and the disposal of wastes (EEA, 1999; MEA, 2006).

Addressing this challenge will necessitate a radical shift in existing patterns of production and consumption, and the transformation of major socio-economic sectors including energy, transport, agriculture, manufacturing and construction (Toner, 2006). Some commentators have dubbed this ‘the next industrial revolution’ (McDonough and Braungart, 1998; Hawken, Lovins and Lovins, 1999). The analogy is apt since it suggests not only fundamental technological advance, but also profound shifts in the organization of society. And in this respect engagement with the politically charged issue of consumption cannot be deferred indefinitely (Princen, Maniates and Conca, 2002).

Second, the idea of governance for sustainable development embodies a specific ‘steering logic’. Sustainable development is not a spontaneous social product: it requires goal-directed intervention by governments and other actors. The objective is to displace the direction of social movement (to a certain extent, and in certain dimensions) so that current (authentic) developmental priorities are attained, while the preconditions for subsequent social advance are not eroded (Meadowcroft, 1997). This form of ‘steering’ does not seek to control every dimension of social life. It can accept that the future is largely unknown and unknowable, and recognise that our collective capacities to determine what is to come are limited (Meadowcroft, 1999). Each generation makes its own choices; and since generations overlap, orientations towards the future are
constantly reviewed. But even in the face of this radical uncertainty and indeterminacy human beings can try: 1) to orient society towards the attainment of desirable objectives and the avoidance of dangerous pitfalls; 2) to take action to protect groups that are especially vulnerable to the unfolding pattern of change; and 3) to re-order social institutions so that they are better placed to cope with whatever the future does bring.

But who is to do this ‘steering’? In a fundamental sense, governance for sustainable development implies a process of ‘societal self-steering’: society as a whole is to be involved in the critical interrogation of existing practices, and to take up the conscious effort to bring about change. Thus it involves not only actions and policies to orient development along certain lines, but also the collective discussion and decision required to define those lines. Value choices – about the kind of society in which we want to live, about the kind of world we want to leave to posterity – lie at the heart of governance for sustainable development. At base, it is not a technical project, although technical expertise is essential, but a political project. For while the concept indicates issues that should be of concern, its practical bearing cannot be established independent of the concrete life circumstances of a particular society and the needs, interests, values and aspirations of its members. Thus governance for sustainable development is ‘interactive’, not just in the instrumental sense that societal inputs can facilitate progress towards known objectives, but also in the deeper sense that the objectives themselves must be collectively defined, refined and re-defined.

We shall return to consider the implications of the reflective and interactive dimensions of governance for sustainable development in the final section of this essay. Here it is important to emphasise that notwithstanding the ‘society-embracing’ character discussed above, this steering logic also implies an important role for public authorities at all levels – including local and regional
governments, national states, supranational unions, and international bodies. In other words, ‘government’ is central to ‘governance’ for sustainable development.

In this context the continued significance of country states requires explicit acknowledgement. Despite changing patterns of societal interaction, increased international economic interdependence, and some surrender of sovereignty to supranational institutions, states remain potent actors (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Eckersley, 2004). Above all, their mechanisms of representation and democracy allow states to claim to act legitimately for the common good. Sustainable development involves the deliberate adjustment of the conditions of social life; and if it requires an interactive and participative element, it also requires formal structures to consider options and to provide for closure and authoritative decision. Thus states provide both a means to shape ‘society’, and a framework through which ‘society’ can influence the orientation of that shaping.

2. The problem of distributed power

That power to influence outcomes is widely distributed across society is an axiom of contemporary political life. In representative democratic political systems, with privately owned productive assets and market-mediated economies, no single group holds a monopoly on power. Much of the literature of political science is concerned with how economic and political powers interact, and with the ways different actors mobilize resources to secure their ends. Classical pluralist theories emphasised diverse forms of power and the capacity of groups to organize to articulate their interests; Marxist and neo-Marxist analyses typically stressed class conflict and underlying economic interests; while more recent writings (for example, by post-modern thinkers) have dwelt on the fractured characteristics of contemporary political life.
Although the boundary between the economic and political spheres in modern democratic societies is permeable, and has varied over time (for example, with nationalization and de-nationalization), at any given moment it poses important constraints on what actors can achieve. Of course, the diffusion of power does not stop here. Political authorities are themselves fragmented. There is vertical ‘layering’ of political jurisdictions extending from local governments, through regional (state, provincial or county) administrations, up to national states, and institutions of international governance. Nation states remain the critical node in this system, but sub-national governments often wield substantial powers, as do certain international bodies. The European Union represents an emergent transnational governmental form. And there are also hybrid centres of authority that deal with issues that cut across jurisdictional boundaries (for example, water resources in the Great Lakes, or tourism in the Alps). Tensions and struggles among all these myriad ‘layers’ of authority are a mainstay of modern politics.

‘Horizontal’ divisions within governments have also become more complex: various ministries and departments, specialized in particular functions, reflect the diversity of tasks government undertakes. Recent decades have also witnessed reforms to the public service that have created an array of semi-autonomous agencies with regulatory, administrative, and service delivery functions. And, as governments have increasingly turned to more ‘interactive’ modes of governance, involving collaboration with other societal partners (businesses, scientific and educational institutions, non governmental organizations), still more players have joined the scene. Of course, political power has long been split among constitutionally mandated authorities (executive, legislature and judiciary), as well as among political leaders, party activists, and the electorate – who are each more or less potent in particular circumstances. The media, too, exerts significant influence, particularly on how issues are framed for public debate.
The economic realm is no more straightforward. While in some contexts the proportion of economic activity controlled by the largest firms has increased, the differentiation of activity has also grown. More of the world has been drawn into the international economic system, and a greater number of internationally based firms are active within national jurisdictions. Although the business world sometimes speaks with one voice, it is also riven with contradictions: the interests of various sectors, industries, and firms pull in different directions. So again, centres of power are multiple; and to some extent fluid. And of course, there are many other social groups, movements and organizations – from trade unions to religious organizations, from grass-roots campaigns to learned societies, which have specific power resources that can be applied in certain contexts to influence the course of events.

There are other ways to conceptualize the diffusion of power in the modern world. Writers in the tradition of critical theory have long noted the different ‘logics’ appropriate to different societal subsystems -- law, science, politics, the economy, and so on (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 1987). And mastering these rationalities can be understood as a pre-requisite to exercising power in different domains. Taking this further, Niklaus Luhmann has insisted on the relative insularity of societal subsystems, which resist inputs from adjacent systems operating with different logics (Luhmann, 1989). The suggestion is that general social steering becomes problematic as functionally adapted subsystems operate on their own internal principles, perhaps to the detriment of the social whole.

And this points to the enduring issue of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. In the modern polity there is both a greater number and diversity of agents that are able to influence events (either consciously, or indirectly as they pursue their own ends), and also a more complex intermeshing of ‘structures’ that enable and constrain these agents, but which are produced and reproduced through their
actions. When considering power it is also important to keep in mind that there is a distinction between power to influence outcomes within a given system of interactions, and the power to influence the transformation of that structure into something different. And there is also a difference between the capacity to block such a structural transformation (veto), and the power to affect a lasting move towards a new and relatively stable outcome.

Returning to sustainable development, it is fairly clear that what is of particular interest is the power to change social practices in the direction of sustainability (as opposed, for example, to the power to secure a particular distribution of social goods, to perpetuate a particular social or political state, or to realize a particular societal blueprint). But this means dealing with distributed centres of power. After all, problems of sustainability typically cut across functional administrative divisions, established territorial jurisdictions, and the economy/politics divide. They involve many actors and have implications for various societal subsystems.

We will return shortly to strategies for negotiating such a complex landscape. But first it is necessary to set this discussion of the diffusion of power in a wider context.

3. Contextualizing the problem of distributed power
The problem of distributed power is just one of three critical challenges facing efforts at governance for sustainable development identified by the editors of this special issue. Indeed, they present this as something of a conundrum. For they point out that sustainable development implies some form of ‘steering’ – to ensure that societal development avoids ‘unsustainable’ outcomes. And to steer successfully we have always been told that one needs a) clear goals, b) a good understanding of relevant causal relationships, and c) the power to influence outcomes. Yet in the context of sustainable development each of these three requirements appears problematic. Goals are vague,
ambivalent, or conflicted. We are plagued by uncertainties and ignorance. And power is distributed among many actors and across many subsystems. In other words, we are not sure, or we cannot agree, exactly where we want to go. We do not fully understand complex, evolving, and interlinked natural and social systems. And power is so broadly dispersed that policy-makers lack the ability to make things happen.

Of course, one could argue that this overstates the case. True, sustainable development is a complex normative standard. And yet the concept is not so abstract as to be devoid of meaning. And while we can not agree on everything, enough of us can agree on what needs to be achieved to move forward (see Walker this issue). Uncertainty and ignorance beset decision-making for sustainable development. But this implies that it is particularly important to elaborate strategies a) to acquire more knowledge in critical areas, and b) to take wise decisions in the absence of full knowledge (see Grunwald this issue). Finally, while there is no doubt that power is distributed widely in modern societies, states retain considerable clout. Moreover, new linkages among governance structures and new modes of public/private interaction are evolving to cope with changing circumstances. Governments still succeed in getting things done, and they can influence the orientation of societal development.

Moreover, it is important to note that these three problems express dilemmas that have always confronted political leaders, particularly in democratic polities: governments are bound to face multiple, conflicting, and perhaps incommensurate objectives; there will never be enough causal knowledge to tackle the issues that really worry us; and policy-makers must by definition deal with alternative centres of power. Of course, we may argue that the situation facing modern leaders is more acute than that which confronted earlier generations of decision makers. In more complex and globally interconnected societies goals are multiple and conflicted, pathways of
natural and social causation are more opaque, and power is more widely diffused. On the other hand, we enjoy many advantages over earlier societies. We understand more about natural and social processes; our technologies are more powerful; and we can reflect upon past experience and our own conduct in ways that were not available to earlier generations. Thus it is not evident that we are worse placed to shape our own destiny. Like earlier peoples we make our history in conditions that are not of our choosing (Marx, 1852). Thus, to some extent, the three challenges formulated above restate general problems of democratic governance – but they do so in a context where global ecological problems and a consciousness of global inequalities have come to the fore.

This is not to suggest that these are not real challenges for governance for sustainable development. To attempt to shift the societal development trajectory, and to radically reduce the human impact on the global ecosphere, is an ambitious goal. And it will involve deployment of particular stratagems to develop operational objectives, to take decisions in conditions of uncertainty, and to drive forward reforms in circumstances of distributed control.

Focusing more particularly on the issue of distributed power, several additional points need to be made. First, before we go too far down the road of bemoaning this dispersal of power, and the plethora of societal actors with which modern governments must engage, we should pause to consider the alternatives. Instead of being distributed, power might be concentrated – either exclusively in the hands of political authorities or perhaps those of private interests. Would this make the situation any better? The experience of the twentieth century suggests not. Whenever political and economic powers have been fused, or power has been monopolized by concentrated political or economic elites, all sorts of abuses proliferated. Certainly the environment did not fare well. So probably we should be reasonably content that power in modern societies is somewhat diffuse.
This observation could also be expressed in terms of the three difficulties discussed above. For if governance for sustainable development really takes place in a context where a) goals are unclear and b) knowledge is limited, should we not be glad that c) power is also dispersed? Again the alternative is worrisome. In fact, this dispersal provides some guarantee that in pursuit of ‘sustainable development’ governments with goals that are confused (or that represent only sectional interests), and which are armed with inadequate and erroneous understanding of natural and social causation, do not have the undisputed power to inflict their projects on the rest of society.

Indeed, just raising the idea of doing without the plural centres of power with which we are so familiar reveals how impossible this would be. To strip out the functional differentiation between economic, legal, scientific, and political spheres and discourses; to move back from specialization and differentiation of labour and knowledge; to do away with fragmented jurisdictions, the complex interpenetration of state/society, and the multitude of self and co-regulating processes; would be to attempt to undo what makes modern democratic societies distinctive. And the forces leading to this diffusion of power (as well as some leading to new concentrations of power) – including functional specialization, democratization, more widespread economic development, and globalization -- are among the most pervasive currents of the modern world.

So diffuse power is something we have to live with. And more than that, it is something closely associated with the positive features of development. Indeed, rather than thinking about the diffusion of power as a problem for sustainable development, we can also see it as an opportunity. It establishes many channels for information to flow, and many ways for feedback from social/environmental interactions to be articulated. It opens the door for multiple routes of intervention in order to encourage the turn towards sustainable development. It provides a range of different groups – all with some power resources -- from which to build coalitions for change. Of
course, in any given context the proliferation of centres of power, the growth in the number of implicated actors, or an increase in veto points, can make organized efforts for reform more difficult. The division of authority in federal systems is a case in point. There is clear evidence that federal systems have more difficulty coordinating country wide engagement with sustainability (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000). On the other hand, federalism evolved as a political response to specific issues (self rule in contexts of large territories, and/or strong regional identities, and/or cultural differences), and without it federal states might long since have broken up – and this would now pose co-ordination problems of another sort. Moreover, federalism allows experimentation and provides a context where sub-national units can act to address issues that are not yet ‘mature’ on the national scene. And here decentralism has favourable impacts. Thus ‘diffuse power’ brings advantages as well as disadvantages. To some extent it only becomes an over-riding concern if we assume that governments (or perhaps some other social group, such as scientists or environmentalists, who would like to get governments to do their bidding) already know exactly what needs to be done and how we should go about doing it. But no one possesses that knowledge in any detail. Nor is it possible to possess this knowledge in advance of the complex societal interactions involved in collectively exploring alternatives, making interim choices, experimenting with reforms, drawing lessons, readjusting goals, and so on, that sustainable development implies.

And this points to the mistake of understanding the ‘steering’ involved in ‘governance for sustainable development’ by making too direct an analogy with a classic policy ‘implementation’ logic. Sure, if one is concerned with addressing a particular issue (say at the program level), officials need clear goals, an adequate causal theory, and substantial implementation potential. For the presumption is that the orientation of policy has already been decisively fixed by political principals operating in a democratic context. But sustainable development is not a ‘particular issue’
of this kind. Rather it is a normative standard that serves as a meta-objective for policy. It must be
given substance in every specific context. And in the process of rendering its bearing ‘concrete’,
discrete goals, relevant causal understandings and enabling strategies can be articulated. Moreover,
as was argued earlier, governance for sustainable development implies a process of societal self-
steering. And while it is important that governments can get things done, what ultimately matters is
that the result of the interactions among the full array of societal actors impels development along a
sustainable trajectory. In other words, the ‘steering’ in governance for sustainable development can
be the result of actions and interactions among many actors -- including those outside government.
And the successful deployment of such ‘distributed’ or ‘de-centred’ steering seems fundamental to
progress towards sustainable development.

To put this another way – a critical component of the ‘steering’ involved in governance for
sustainable development are the societal interactions which can help define ‘clear goals’ and
develop better causal theories. And in this context the diffusion of power is important – because it is
essential to the operation of processes whereby goals can be formulated (democratic interaction)
and knowledge developed (social and scientific discourse).

Third, while the diffusion of power (among a greater or lesser number of actors or
subsystems) is significant, attention must also be paid to the pattern of its distribution (how it is
spread across the relevant actors and subsystems), as well as to the character of that power and the
resources upon which it is based. Power is not distributed equally; instead it is lumpy. Some groups
and individuals possess a lot of it, and others less. Power comes in many forms, and some of these
are not readily fungible (convertible into other forms of power). Money can do a lot, but it can not
do everything. The same goes for influence, knowledge, laws, arms, and all the other resources that
underpin power. Generally speaking, groups with the most power are also those that have gained (or
at least believe that they gain) the most from existing ways of doing things. And so they are understandably resistant to certain types of change. In business, incumbent groups controlling established technologies enjoy structural advantages over later entrants and emergent technological options. Established producer groups may have secured extensive subsidies and political protections (for example, agriculture in many developed states, and much of the fossil fuel industry). And the concentrated clout of such special interests systematically overrules the diffuse interest of the general public. Alternatively, some disadvantaged groups may possess little power under present socio/political circumstances, but have the potential to exert pressure should they be mobilized.

In fact, diffusion and distribution are closely inter-related; as one shifts so does the other. But the implications of diffusion may be quite different depending on the character of the resultant distribution. A shift from a situation where power is split between two main stakeholders to one where three, four or more groups are involved (i.e. ‘diffusion’) may actually make initiation of change easier (rather than harder), depending on the particular distribution and forms of power available to each actor.

5. Steering in contexts of distributed power.

Although governance cannot be reduced to the actions of government, and sustainable development involves processes of ‘societal self-steering’, much of the responsibility for actually ensuring that progress is being made rests with governments. After all, governments are the only institutions with a general mandate to promote the public good with (at least in democratic systems) clear lines of accountability to the general population. Thus governments must come to terms with steering for sustainable development in the radically polycentric environment described above.
Navigating in such complex contexts – advancing an ambitious reform agenda when power is fragmented among many actors and subsystems – implies a turn towards a more interactive/reflective mode of governance. What does this mean? It means extending an approach to governance that consciously employs interactions with other power centres to define and realize goals, and that encourages reflection (within government but also across society) about societal circumstances in order to reassess practices and adjust initiatives. Critical elements of such an approach include:

• acting from the understanding that government is just one (albeit one crucial) component of the overall process of societal governance. Thus government actions are oriented to increase the likelihood that the system as a whole will evolve in the desired direction. The focus is on enabling those factors and forces -- within the political/legal/administrative sphere and in society more broadly -- that tend to promote a sustainable orientation towards development.

• exploiting interactions among actors to gain knowledge about interests, perspectives, and capacities and to learn about the character of societal/environmental linkages, as well as the opportunities for (and obstacles to) change. In many cases it is only by initiating action, gauging the reactions of other parties, and assessing societal impacts, that it is possible to gain the understanding necessary to define a pathway to more significant reform.

• establishing long term objectives that operationalize sustainable development in the specific societal context. Formulating such goals, as well as possible routes to their attainment and shorter term objectives to get the process of change under way, are critical to providing actors with a vision of how the system can be expected to evolve, as well as to establish reference points with respect to which progress can be assessed, and subsequent adjustments to the goals and the means applied to secure them can be oriented.
• supporting the extension of co-governance networks around specific issues, particularly those that draw together organizations from across the state/business/civil society divide. In some cases governments may participate directly in such co-operative management regimes. But whether or not they are involved directly, governments can promote political conditions favourable to such initiatives and have a responsibility to monitor their results.

• ensuring the development of varied institutions to track social and environmental trends, to analyse and assess existing practices and the effectiveness of policy initiatives, and to audit performance. Such knowledge is important for government, but also for other organizations and citizens. Much of this work needs to be done by a diversity of bodies supported by public resources but enjoying substantial independence from political and administrative interference.

• promoting the emergence of a vibrant ‘public sphere’, to accommodate continuous discussion of social choices and critical reflection on the development path and policy approaches (Torgerson, 1999). Such a dynamic space can encourage the consolidation of new ideas and practices, strengthen a public ethos of sustainability, and renew political support for the continuing process of reform.

• encouraging the growth of ‘ecological citizenship’ -- among individual and collective actors. For, if the state can furnish both a framework for collective decision-making about sustainable development and a mechanism to actualize these decisions, it is society that will provide the underlying dynamism, inventiveness and normative impetus. And this is as true for choices made in the spheres of domestic consumption and social production as it is in those of community service and political activism. So, by promoting forms of citizenship that think critically about social/environmental interactions, engage practically with collective problems, as assume
responsibility for conduct in private and public life, government can strengthen the societal foundation for the transition towards sustainable development.

Interactive/reflective governance does not mean that government simply responds to whichever social group ‘shouts the loudest’ in a given context. On the contrary, interactions are used as a deliberate tool to develop knowledge and to construct an understanding of the public good that transcends particular interests, and can be shared widely. In other words, interactive/reflective governance is a dynamic posture, oriented to exploiting the diffusion of power to promote adjustment of the development trajectory. It is about judicious interventions to channel social energies down pathways conductive to sustainability.

Moreover, the fact that ‘co-governance’ arrangements are particularly appropriate does not mean that all governance is to be remade upon this model. On the contrary, more traditional modes of state action -- where government proscribes and enforces -- must underpin the elaboration of collaborative initiatives (Glasbergen, 1998). And ‘self-governance’ forms, where sets of social actors take responsibility for ordering their own affairs and maintaining standards that promote a broader social good, are also important. But such approaches can be closely inter-linked with collaborative mechanisms.

Interactive/reflexive governance, and the increasingly complex patterns of organizational interdependence which it both reflects and encourages, does not imply that governments decline to act unilaterally. On the contrary, unilateral action – passing a law, raising a tax, introducing an institutional reform – is often necessary to break the resistance of entrenched interests and to upset the existing equilibrium. Deliberate destabilization of established ways of doing things – even in the absence of the possibility of imposing a new equilibrium – can be a crucial resource of reformers. In
political terms, the trick is to initiate change that creates pressures for further reform and adjustment, rather than playing into feedback mechanisms that revert to the status quo.

In recent years the idea of ‘reflexivity’ has been invoked by social theorists in many different ways. Bhaskar identified it with the requirement for every modern theory to locate itself within the context which brought it forth (Bhaskar, 1993). Giddens talked of ‘the use of information about the conditions of an activity as a means of regularly reordering and redefining what that activity is’ (Giddens, 1990, p. 86). Beck associated ‘reflexive modernization’ with processes ‘in which one kind of modernization undercuts and changes another’ (Beck, 1994, p. 2). More recently, and in the context of the discussion of governance for sustainable development, Voß and Kemp have attempted to distinguish ‘first’ and ‘second order’ reflexivity, with the first referring to the feedback effects which originally interested Beck (as modernity confronts side-effects of its own advance), and the second denoting conscious reflection that transcends the routine problem solving and fragmented rationalities of modernity and attempts to come to grips with underlying problems (Voß and Kemp, 2005). ‘Learning’ and ‘immanent critique’ are the elements highlighted by Eckersley in her book on the ‘green state’ which points to varying degrees of reflexivity embedded in different forms of re-appraisal and adjustment of the state’s role (Eckersley, 2004, pp. 81).

The understanding of interactive/reflective governance employed here actually falls closest to the orientation of Grin and Hendriks (this volume), where reflexivity is linked to the ‘transformation of the governance system itself’ and the search for innovative solutions to social problems by moving beyond surface manifestations to uncover structural and systemic underpinnings. There is a link to notions of ‘reflexive designing’ (Grin et al, 2004), and the emphasis is placed more centrally on politics, civil society, and the interstices where ‘different discursive spheres overlap’. (Grin and Hendriks, this volume; see also Meadowcroft, 2004).
Nevertheless, the double-barrelled term ‘interactive/reflective’ has been employed here to highlight two issues. The first is that active and agent-centred processes of reflection are the primary concern. Governance for sustainable development implies conscious reflection about the past, present and future, including the potentially radical interrogation of the nature of social progress and the character of authentic development. The second is that particular kinds of interactions are central to steering society along sustainable lines. On one level, this is due to the diffusion on power and the increased societal complexity considered above. But on another it is related to the democratic content of sustainable development. For without democratic and participatory interactions there is no way to generate the ‘reflectivity’ necessary to re-orienting the development trajectory along sustainable lines.

In attempting to influence reform initiatives across a range of social actors and sectors, interactive/reflective governance can employ many techniques. One critical element is what might be described as ‘ideological steering’: the development of sets of inter-related ideas that influence activities at all levels. Here co-ordination is achieved not by hierarchical control, but because actors (including both individuals and institutions) internalize certain perspectives, and independently orient (and re-orient) their actions in consequence. ‘Ideology’ is not used in the sense of classic ‘political ideologies’ – liberalism, conservatism, socialism, and so on. But rather to refer to broader sets of social ideas that to some extent transcend these political currents, and provide a frame within which political argument takes place. Sustainable development is clearly an idea of this type. But a concept at such a high level of abstraction needs to be surrounded by many other concepts that concretize its orientation and articulate a more complete societal vision. Codes of behaviour, standards of appropriate conduct – that apply to public officials, but also individual citizens – provide an important mechanism for influencing outcomes. Such ‘universalizing’ ideas can to some
extent cut across the divisions among subsystems, affirming general values and orientations, and encouraging their internalization across the range of diverse societal activities. Thus education and communication strategies become critical elements in governance for sustainable development. And one should consider the role which all sorts of groups (including professional and occupational bodies) can play in developing and transmitting such ‘ideology’.

In developing an interactive/reflexive approach governments can intervene to shift the distribution of power in ways that encourage adjustments conducive to sustainable development. Techniques for shifting power balances include:

- **Adjusting legal rights and responsibilities.** Government intervenes to adjust the legal obligations of established actors, making some avenues of development easier and other more difficult (costly, contentious, and risky) to pursue. An example is provided by disclosure requirements that oblige industry to identify hazardous substances used at local facilities. By requiring companies to make such information public, the balance is tipped slightly towards groups campaigning against toxic releases. Changes to liability regimes for environmental damage can work in a similar way. Or one could consider re-defining the responsibilities of regulatory agencies.

- **Creating new institutional actors.** Governments lend support (financial, organisational, moral) to encourage the creation of autonomous actors who can promote change. This can include transferring functions from the core of government to bodies that work at arms length. This can provide many advantages including reducing day to day political interference, freeing the bodies from bureaucratic routines and mind-set, increasing public confidence, and serving as a hedge against changed political priorities. New actors can be created by hiving-off existing structures, fusing discrete units, or starting from scratch. And the resultant body can be granted different
degrees of autonomy. Alternatively, governments can assist other parties to organize themselves – to promote particular causes or regulate their own affairs. The encouragement of sectoral self-organization to engage with climate change is a case in point.

- **Establishing new centres of economic power.** Government intervenes to strengthen economic actors whose activities point in the direction of desired social ends. The best example here is encouragement of the green business sector (renewable energy, organic farming). Not only do such interventions secure direct environmental and economic gains (more green energy, growing export markets), they have the indirect effect of bolstering constituencies advocating further change (for example, the removal of subsidies to fossil fuels, reduction of pesticide usage). Current economic interests (with established facilities, technical know-how, jobs, export earnings, and so on) are like large masses in a gravitational system – they exert political ‘pull’ in proportion to their size. To counter-balance their influence it is necessary to build rival enterprises that can offer jobs, tax revenues, exports, along a line of advance congruent with sustainable development.

- **Encouraging inter-organizational collaboration.** Government encourages new patterns of interaction among existing organizations to favour innovation for sustainable development. By bringing groups together to address particular problems, power relations can be subtly adjusted (see Kemp, this issue). These may be groups enmeshed in an established problem matrix; but by encouraging interaction in a collaborative, solution-oriented, framework, it may be possible to redefine issues and interests. Or groups previously unaware of each other’s existence may be brought together in ‘innovation networks’ that link some combination of consumers, producers, administrators, entrepreneurs, and researchers to accelerate technological and social innovation. Such organisational alliances can encourage the development of new
products and markets, new ideas and cultural values – and strengthen the resources available to those championing sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

Steering in a polycentric environment presents a real challenge for modern governments; one that is particularly evident in relation to sustainable development. And yet governments are not bereft of approaches that can fruitfully be applied. Central to this effort is the turn towards more interactive/reflective modes of governance that encourage societal ‘self-analysis’ to assess and reassess the development trajectory, and exploit interactive processes to increase the manageability of long term social change. Such approaches appreciate the reality of ‘distributed control’ and exploit it to define, and to achieve, social ends. Interestingly, key elements of this perspective on governance can also contribute to handling the two other vexatious problems discussed in this special issue: goal ambiguity and uncertainty. The interactional approach to accumulating social knowledge, the extension of co-governance arrangements, and the establishment of a vibrant public sphere, can help build consensus around societal goals -- so reducing goal-centred ambivalence. And the establishment of longer term operational goals, the extension of co-management arrangements, and the development of pluralistic networks for reviewing social and environmental trends and policy performance, can help reduce uncertainties.

One final point should be stressed before this discussion is brought to a close. And that is the irreducibly political (and ultimately democratic and participatory) character of sustainable development. Reference has already been made to the fact that governance for sustainable development is not just a technical/administrative challenge. It is not something that competent officials can get done quietly and efficiently, out of the public view, as citizens go about their
everyday business. On the contrary, it is an inherently political process – for it requires societal decisions about desirable ways of life, and about how benefits and burdens are to be shared among different communities and different generations, and between humankind and other inhabitants of this planet. The sort of radical decoupling of economic activity from environmental burdens that sustainable development implies will require iterative processes of reform stretching over many decades. To succeed these reforms must reflect the values and aspirations of the active elements in society. They must be backed by popular support. Thus political struggles and processes – involving the messy worlds of party politics and electoral contest -- are inevitably part of the sustainable development steering problematic. At time conflicts over policy orientations will be acute. There will be continuous struggles to construct and to hold together the coalitions required to advance reform in different sectors. And here, the dynamism of communities and citizen activists, and the skills and dedication of political leaders, will be as important as any lessons from the political and administrative sciences in ensuring that governance for sustainable development remains on track.

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