

# Urban sustainability and public awareness: The role of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy in Canada

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## Introduction

The challenge of raising awareness and building momentum in support of the natural city will be a key factor in the development of truly sustainable communities. If we fail to harness public demand for the economic and quality of life benefits that go along with a natural city, we will find ourselves winning most of the arguments and losing most of the decisions that will be needed to make the potential a reality. And that is not the future that any of us would prefer to see.

## The National Round Table

The National Round Table on the Environment and Economy has been in the business of public awareness for many years, and still is. As part of this commitment, we have provided and continue to provide support for classroom and other forms of education, as well as general public awareness on sustainability.

Let me give you a few examples of our activities in this field:

- In the late 1990s, we developed a catalogue of sustainable development education programming in centers of higher learning across Canada.<sup>1</sup> We published a community-based social marketing workbook that set out some of the tried and true techniques for building awareness and buy-in at the grassroots.<sup>2</sup>
- We served as an incubator for the sustainable cities initiative, a multi-million-dollar partnership program that has since been taken over by Industry Canada. The federal government's strategies website now describes sustainable cities as a program, "... aimed at enhancing the sustainability of economic development in cities, and helping its citizens in improving their quality of life without compromising their future."
- On the ground, the program supports sustainable development expertise and infrastructure in more than a dozen cities in Africa, Asia, South and Central America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. Its methods are based on a multi-sector, multi-stakeholder approach to water, waste, energy, transportation, and other key urban issues.
- Closer to home, our usage statistics tell us that our web site and virtual library are in constant use as a resource for secondary and post-secondary students and instructors across Canada. Classrooms rank among our 10 audiences for electronic information, and we serve as a reference for several hundred school groups each year.

These activities are a very important part of our ongoing contribution to public awareness. But I know that other panelists will be discussing school environments in more depth, so I will devote my time to some of the other elements of our public awareness mandate.

We each have a part to play on the road to sustainable development, and long experience has taught us that the National Round Table's unique contribution is a convening power that enables us to act as a catalyst in identifying, explaining, and promoting the principles and practices of sustainable development.

We exist to create a neutral forum where stakeholders and senior decision makers can set aside fixed agendas, hammer out their issues, and seek common ground. In this way, we promote a form of self-directed learning and exploration with

participants who are in a position to make or influence policy decisions at the local, provincial, and federal levels.

This approach has led to some significant and measurable results:

- Within Canada's federal system, our annual greening of the budget submission has had a consistent impact on fiscal policy, and many of our major initiatives have been reflected in recent budgets and Speeches from the Throne.
- Most recently, the 2004 Speech from the Throne acknowledged the three years of concentrated effort that we put into an initial set of environment and sustainable development indicators. The indicators take us down the road toward a conceptual model that places environmental quality and quality of life on a par with more traditional measure of economic progress. The Speech from the Throne affirmed the federal government's commitment to "start incorporating key indicators on clean water, clear air, and emission reduction into its decision-making," and the government has already committed \$15 million to the next stage of work on indicators.
- In Ontario, we see some of the key issues raised by National Round Table Task Forces reflected in provincial policy. When the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing invited public comment on the province's land use planning process, the announcement referred to issues like protection of green spaces, redevelopment of urban brownfields,<sup>3</sup> reduced gridlock and traffic congestion, urban greening, and the need to locate housing and jobs in closer proximity ... all of which were major themes in our recent reports on brownfields<sup>4</sup> and sustainable cities.<sup>5</sup>
- And in a wonderful example of collaboration and partnership across sectors, we were delighted last March to hear about the formation of a Canadian Brownfields Network. We were particularly gratified that the network will explicitly pursue our recommendation on brownfields development.

All of this activity is consistent with our role within the Canadian federal structure. The National Round Table is a multi-stakeholder group, appointed by the Prime Minister to reflect the interest of business, labor, environmental organizations, academia, and aboriginal groups. As you can see by my presence here today, we also have representatives from municipal governments.

Our mandate is to explore the balance between economic progress and environmental improvement ... from the perspective that the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the other way around. Our experience with a wide variety of policy issues has taught us that the most important word in our name is the "and": the value we bring to public policy is our ability to situate and characterize the debate at the junction between the environment and the economy, and to work with a variety of stakeholders to generate positive, creative results.

Beyond the specific issues we address, we believe we have made a substantial contribution to the *process* of public policy making in Canada. Over the past 10 years, we have developed a well-defined multi-stakeholder process for engaging a wide range of voices and interests in meaningful, effective discussion. We examine issues with the assistance of Task Forces, each of which is a microcosm of the Round Table itself.

As I have already suggested, some of our best work over the past decade has addressed the profound environmental and economic challenges facing our cities. Our early work on water and wastewater services in Canada resulted in "State of the Debate" analysis that was ahead of its time.<sup>6</sup> It addressed crucial issues related to water and wastewater pricing, financing, regulation, and infrastructure. And it raised an early alarm about the potential for human tragedy that was later played out in the water quality crises that struck Walkerton, Ontario and

North Battleford, Saskatchewan.<sup>7</sup>

Several years ago, the National Round Table launched its program on urban environmental quality with the knowledge that more Canadians than ever before are choosing to make their homes in urban centers. Four out of five of us already live in cities and that proportion is expected to increase over the next two decades.

If urban concentration is a growing concern in Canada, the situation is already dire in the wider world that is becoming smaller with each passing day. Over the next 25 years, nearly two-thirds of the world's population will live in urban communities, and 2.4 billion people will be born there. The sheer pace and scope of urbanization worldwide raises fundamental questions about our capacity to meet the demand for sustainable transportation, water and wastewater systems, energy supplies and services, and housing.

Canadians do expect that our communities will continue to be safe, comfortable places to live, work, and play. But we see evidence that our urban centers are already suffering from environmental decline. At the National Round Table, we are convinced that environmental quality is a key factor in attracting and retaining the talent and brain power that will drive the knowledge-based industries of the future, which means that quality of life in Canada's cities will be one of the defining challenges of this century, with implications for both the environmental and economic sustainability of our country.

## The Urban Task Force

These were some of our concerns when our Urban Task Force began its work. By the time the process was complete, we had coalesced around three over-arching themes.

- Our first theme was the understanding that the federal government is already a major player in the everyday life of our cities. With \$55 billion in annual spending in urban settings, not including the Goods and Service Tax Rebate, there is ample opportunity for the government to lead by example. A very solid first step would be to realign federal investment and program initiatives to be more consistent with the drive toward urban environmental quality.
- The second theme was the need to "spend smart," to ensure that we derive the greatest environmental and economic impact from every dollar we invest in our cities. The National Round Table sees this as a perfect objective to tackle with fiscal policy tools, since so many of the decisions that can make or break the urban environment are influenced by price. A major challenge is to fashion federal fiscal policies that will unilaterally improve urban environmental quality with stable, long-term funding, without intruding on the provinces' constitutional jurisdiction over municipalities.
- Third, we recognized the importance of new relationships among the order of government. We argued for stronger synergies among federal policies and programs. And we asserted that the government's single most powerful policy instrument – fiscal policy – should be its most articulate spokesperson.

If Canadians genuinely value the environmental quality of their cities and communities, our fiscal policy should speak out loudly and clearly on behalf of urban sustainability. If we know that Canadians will choose to live in communities with clean air, safe drinking water, efficient transit, and adequate green space, federal fiscal policy is a powerful tool that can help make those choices possible.

If we have evidence that the entrepreneurs and specialists who drive the knowledge economy will decide where to live based on local quality of life – at that point, our economic prosperity depends in large part on fiscal policies that will help those knowledge workers choose Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver,

or Montreal over San José, Boston or Redmond.

## The urban report

The urban report identified three interrelated areas – urban form, transportation, and energy use – where the federal government could best deploy its taxation and spending powers in the interest of urban environmental quality. The National Round Table's Brownfields Redevelopment Strategy emphasized the seven billion dollar development opportunity embodied in Canada's 30,000 brownfield sites. It demonstrated that brownfields redevelopment can be the key to building desirable urban neighborhoods, locating new commercial or residential development near existing transit services, and increasing the value of surrounding properties.

Our report recommended a package of incentives, regulatory changes, and partnerships to stimulate Canada's brownfield redevelopment sector. We stressed the need for strategic public investment to address up-front costs, an effective public policy regime for environmental liability and risk management, and better capacity and awareness around brownfield redevelopment.

Since its release last year, the strategy has generated tangible results. The 2004 Speech from the Throne committed \$3.5 billion over 10 years to clean up contaminated sites. The Canadian Brownfields Network is a reality. Given my own background in municipal politics, I am particularly proud of the National Round Table's role in helping to move this issue closer to the top of the federal agenda.

## Seven-city tour

These messages were at the forefront when the National Round Table organized a **seven-city tour on urban environmental quality and brownfield redevelopment** that concluded earlier in the year. The tour was a great example of the targeted public awareness that has become our stock in trade: it was designed to broaden awareness and understanding of the recommendations of the two Task Forces, to help generate momentum for coherent policy response to the needs of urban centers across Canada.

The tour consisted of a series of half-day information sessions in seven large municipalities – Calgary, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Montreal, Halifax, Ottawa, and Toronto. At each session, we sought to focus the discussion by inviting local municipal leaders and officials, and key decision makers from business and other sectors. To bring the discussion home to the local level, we invited panels of experts to respond to our recommendations and link them back to priorities in each community.

Like many of our recent conferences and public events, community response to the urban tour exceeded our expectations – quantitatively and qualitatively. In many of the sessions, local attendance threatened to exceed the capacity of the meeting halls we had booked – the kind of problem that policy and public awareness people love to have.

But the quality of participation in the urban tour went far beyond the numbers, and was ultimately far more important. In each city, mayors and senior municipal officials joined with local business leaders, policy makers, and professionals from every sector and order of government to tell us that the time had come to put our cities on a more sustainable footing.

The urban tour was a good example of public awareness at its best – not only because the subject matter linked directly to the natural city, but because the process had everything to do with multi-stakeholder contact and awareness.

Whenever the National Round Table convenes a Task Force or issues a "State of the Debate" report, it is important to

us to get our message out to the broadest possible audience. But our impact on policy also has a great deal to do with the specific audiences that we touch. Consistent with our approach to awareness and engagement, many of the stakeholders who took part in the urban tour were in a position to influence or take part in the policy decision that will shape our cities for years to come. We have seen the same dynamic at our recent conferences in subject areas as diverse as environment and sustainable development indicators, and the conservation of Canada's natural heritage.

All in all, my experience with the National Round Table tells me that we are bringing about a substantial evolution in policy, which should be gratifying for anyone with an interest in the Natural City. At the same time, we know there are still a number of challenges to be addressed on the road to sustainability, and that many of them will benefit from the National Round Table's contribution as a convener and a catalyst for policy development.

## New initiatives

In May, our members began laying the groundwork for a new series of multi-stakeholder initiatives that will likely be launched in the next year. As the discussion proceeded, it was clear that many of us were concerned about the pace at which the broad objective of sustainable development has been advanced in the two decades since the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development.

The city where I work as special advisor to the mayor was recently identified by the firm of William Mercer International Consultants as one of the five best cities in the world in which to live. And from that vantage point, I brought some specific observations to the table.

- The first was the urgent need to **make the transition from a waste society to a reduce-and-reuse society.**

For some time, we have built our communities and our wider society on the implied assumption that we can continue to harvest resources from the planet and discard them when they are used up. As a direct result, we now face a decline in our natural capital and a dramatic increase in landfilling, air and water pollution, and other forms of waste.

I doubt that anyone ever assumed these practices were sustainable – I think it far more likely that no one asked the question until fairly recently. But none of us can imagine today that we can continue to waste scarce resources in a way that fouls the cities and communities we call home.

There is a growing body of research and practice which suggests that zero discharge is an attainable goal, that any waste at all represents a resource that has been squandered or an industrial process that has been inadequately planned or thought out. We will not get there overnight, but it is obvious that our quality of life and our progress toward the natural city depend in large part on our approach to resource utilization and waste.

- Much of the same can be said about **energy.** The recent history of human civilization has been characterized by a dependency on fossil fuel resources that are, by definition, finite. With energy consumption on the rise, global populations increasing, and developing countries quite rightly striving for a better life and higher lever of prosperity, a collision is inevitable. It is clear to me that the efficiency of our energy systems must increase exponentially, and that the future of energy is almost certainly renewable.

The National Round Table has dealt with the link between energy, the economy, and the environment in a number of recent initiatives, most recently through a Task Force on climate change and energy which held two multi-stakeholder

meetings earlier this month. The basic ground rule for a Task Force is that every energy option is open to consideration, because that is the way we work – over a period of months, the Task Force will consult key stakeholders, assess the State of the Debate, and recommend practical measures for addressing a contentious, multi-faceted issue.

● My third observation is that this entire discussion has **important parallels in the assumption that underlie our economic system**. Here, again, we have accepted an automatic link between prosperity and continued economic growth, even as we look back at ancient civilizations that collapsed under the weight of similarly faulty logic.

## Conclusion

The reality is that nature will always win ... and we know that we can win along with it. But I think it must be obvious that we are in for yet another collision if we fail to anticipate the combined impacts of some of the trends we have been discussing: I am referring, of course, to rapid urbanization, growing population, the erosion of natural capital, declining environmental quality, and higher standards of living and the expectations they generate. The Round Table has addressed this issue from a number of vantage points, including the sustainable cities initiative and environment and sustainable development indicators. But it is safe to predict that the issues and the challenges will be with us for some time.

So, exactly where does this leave us? We can readily agree that our success in building the natural city will depend in large part on awareness and engagement at all levels of society. I believe that groundwork is in place for a major, lasting shift in the treatment that cities receive as the country's leading economic engine and as a sector where a transition to sustainability is both possible and necessary. The momentum has

been building in Canada, and my hope is that the picture will get steadily brighter over time.

At the National Round Table, we look forward to working closely with the full range of partners and stakeholders, to continue building public engagement with the sustainable future of which the natural city is one important part.

## Notes and references

1. National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (1998), *Bridging Business and Sustainable Development Education at Centres of Higher Learning in Canada: An Annotated Bibliography for Business and Management Schools* (Ottawa, National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy).
2. J. Kassirer and D. McKenzie-Mohr (1998), *Tools of Change: Proven Methods for Promoting Environmental Citizenship* (Ottawa, National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy).
3. "While there is no single, legal definition of a "brownfield" in Canada, it is generally considered to be an abandoned, vacant, derelict, or underutilized commercial or industrial property where past actions have resulted in actual or perceived contamination and where there is an active potential for redevelopment." National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (1998), *Greening Canada's Brownfield Sites* (Ottawa).
4. National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (1998), *Greening Canada's Brownfield Sites* (Ottawa).
5. National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (2003), *Environmental Quality in Canadian Cities: The Federal Role* (Ottawa).
6. National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (1996), *Water and Wastewater Services in Canada* (Ottawa).
7. In Walkerton, Ontario, drinking water contaminated with *e.coli* and *campylobacter* bacteria killed seven people and made over 2,300 ill in May of 2000. In March 2001-April 2001, nearly 6,000 people in North Battleford, Saskatchewan became ill after drinking water contaminated with the *Cryptosporidium parvum* protozoan.