

# ECONEWS

Issue 206

Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

OCTOBER 2010

## SUSTAINABILITY - A NEW RENAISSANCE

When you hear the word “sustainability” being used on the bus, you know something’s happening.

It’s a long word, and some would say its meaning has been hopelessly compromised by greenwashing and PR games designed to fool us such as “sustainable oil sands production”.

I feel a deeper shift, however - a cultural groundswell that has the potential to change the way we live in a truly fundamental way similar to the Renaissance or the Reformation, five hundred years ago.

But first, what does it mean? The original 1987 Brundtland Commission definition says it is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

The intention is good, but the words are too loose - they read as if “there ain’t nobody here but us humans”. My preferred definition is more elaborate:

*“Sustainability is a condition of existence that enables the present generation of humans and other species to enjoy social well-being, a vibrant economy, and a healthy environment, without compromising the ability of future generations to enjoy the same.”*

Alternatively, it is simply “living in harmony with Nature”, using the capital “N” to give Nature the same respect we give to nations, cities, and ourselves.

If we do *not* find a way to live in harmony with Nature, we’re in terrible trouble. Business-as-usual, with its unsustainable consumption of fossil fuels, farmland, forests, fish and almost everything else, is pushing our civilization straight for the cliff - and that’s got many people unable to sleep at night, wrestling with the urgent question “What can I do?”

It is out of this distress that the vision of sustainability is arising, offering both a dream and a global movement. When we look at the history

of civilizations, it is easy to see that they do collapse when they fail to respond to challenges. They can also change, however, and become something new.

The Renaissance metaphor is useful in that it implies an upsurge of hope and vitality. But rather than placing Man at the centre of things, pushing aside the oppression of the medieval church, the vision of sustainability invites us to step back from our dominance and make room for Nature, in respectful and flourishing co-existence.



The Reformation metaphor is useful in that it lets us compare today’s big banks and corporations to the Catholic church of 16<sup>th</sup> century Rome.

Five hundred years ago, priests sold indulgences to ordinary people to buy their way out of hell. Yesterday, banks and finance houses sold sub-prime mortgages to low-income people to buy their way out of poverty. The same lubricity and trickery stemmed from the same unfortunate sense of power and self-importance.

In 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, it led to a rejection of Catholicism, and the birth through Protestant beliefs of a new relationship with God, direct and unmediated by priests or rituals.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it can lead to the rejection of free market capitalism and consumerism, and the birth of a new

relationship with Nature, unmediated by distant banks, corporations and superstores.

In today’s business-as-usual world, it is considered normal to buy chemically grown food and clearcut timber, and to invest your savings in fossil fuels through innocent sounding investment funds. With every economic transaction we make, Nature is destroyed a little.

In the emerging sustainable world, it will be normal to know that every economic transaction helps to *restore* Nature, not destroy it. During the transition, it will be normal to see green labels and certifications on food, timber, houses, investments, energy, businesses, banks, and everything else, telling us that the production, transport and activities have been “greened”, with a view to being 100% sustainable by a certain year. The energy will all be renewable, the food organic, the operations zero waste, their actions all ecologically restorative.

In late 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe, many people believed that the world was about to end. They were right - but not as they thought it. The old world *did* end, and a new world was born.

Today, many people who have read the forecasts of environmental collapse believe things are hopeless, and perhaps we’d be better off without civilization and all its ills. Leave it to the bugs and bacteria, they argue.

If people had thought this way in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there would have been no Renaissance, no Reformation.

So how does it happen? If you work in a business, form a Green Team. If you work in a hopelessly brown job, quit it and find something greener. If you want change, join one of the many groups that exist in your community, or form a new one. And above all, believe that it is possible.

Guy Dauncey