



THE FOURTH PILLAR IN THREE COUNTRIES

AUSTRALIA: *The Australian Context*

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This paper attempts an argument in reverse. It begins with an assumed understanding of the notion of cultural sustainability and analyses the adoption of cultural sustainability principles by Australian policy makers. It asks how the agenda is progressing and what we have learned in these early stages of the journey. This leads to an admission that perhaps we're not always entirely sure what it is we're pursuing. Upon this realisation the structure of the argument dissolves into conjecture. Certainty gives way to a suspicion that the premises of the argument are less well established than we may have assumed and there may be some that we haven't been paying enough attention to. So I'll attempt to regain a grasp of the topic by returning to the language and the history of it—by establishing first principles for cultural sustainability.

I want to start by telling you a story. But the slightly back to front structure of this presentation means that it will have to wait. I'm not nearly at the beginning yet. Eventually I'll get to my story just before I take my seat again.

So, in summing up, within the lexicon of Australian local government cultural sustainability, cultural vitality, the four pillars and the quadruple bottom line have gained a strong foothold. Local governments throughout the country are using the language and grappling with the concept. It is clear that, in this country, governments at the municipal level have taken the lead on implementing the cultural sustainability agenda. Even within the 'rates, roads and rubbish' framework of our local government associations the concept is gaining credence. Nevertheless I'd argue there is a leadership role waiting for those organisations that they have not yet taken up.

At a state and, to a lesser extent, at a federal level there are encouraging signs. And non-government organisations are playing a pivotal role in driving the changes. But Australia is a long way from reaching the 'across the board' commitment that may be required to ensure that, in a complex globalised world, our cultural strengths are preserved and enhanced for coming generations. That is the challenge that lies ahead.

To reach this conclusion requires examples of course, and I'm aware that any list will be inconclusive. So please, rather than harbouring disappointment if the work of your council or organisation isn't mentioned, come and tell me about it and tell everybody else that you can. The preceding list (which I'm about to get to) is just an indicative snapshot of the levels of engagement in this topic in Australia.

Councils like Marion and Port Adelaide Enfield in South Australia demonstrate a strong commitment to sustainability that is supported in that state, on a statewide level, by Local Agenda 21. While Marion encouragingly describes Local Agenda 21 as a 'framework for Council to start the ball rolling in becoming more responsive to integrating environmental, social, cultural and economic goals' the focus of this project, which has the support of the LGA and State Government departments, leans strongly towards environmental sustainability.

This should be regarded not so much as a problem as an opportunity, as ecological issues offer a ready point of engagement for an expanded notion of sustainability. In fact the four pillars model is often put forward, at least initially, as an extension of either the existing sustainability model (the triple bottom line) or the existing dominant cultural models (CCD and the like). Though there is an element of compromise in such cautious approaches, both have proved effective as ways to insert cultural sustainability into organisational policy frameworks and the all important minds of senior bureaucrats and politicians.

Once established, the language and the message can gain traction and find their way into core policy documents. Community Plans such as Sutherland Shire's 'Shape the Shire' or Cultural Plans such as Brisbane's 'Living in Brisbane 2010' are good examples, incorporating the fourth pillar agenda and shifting the planning focus towards long-term cultural sustainability. Elsewhere the fourth pillar is particularly evident in strategic documents such as health plans and urban planning frameworks.

At the City of Port Phillip in Melbourne the four pillars (including 'cultural vitality') apply to all decision making and, as such, feature in all council documents from internal budgetary considerations to the City Plan. This level of integration and commitment represents a more aggressive approach to cultural sustainability, embedding it deeply into the organisational and community psyche.

At a state level, the cultural components of public policy emerge strongly in the operation of many agencies and, as with the Department of Victorian Communities, are beginning to demand dedicated consideration at a ministerial level. Elsewhere the

scope of sustainability agendas is expanding beyond the notion of ecologically sustainable development. For example the background papers of the Policy Division of Western Australia's Department of Premier and Cabinet indicate an acute appreciation of urban design and economic policy drivers as well as the cultural sustainability work of Jon Hawkes.

At a federal level, a similar path through an expansion of either the existing cultural or ecological sustainability frameworks is more evident than the whole-hearted embrace of the four pillars that many in this room would champion. Uptake is spasmodic but there is evidence of an emerging agenda and it can be found within all facets of public policy. Capital infrastructure and construction, for instance, might not be the first place one would expect to find a commitment to cultural sustainability. Nevertheless the Australian Procurement and Construction Council, sum up the interconnection of the four pillars very neatly, 'Sustainable development ... meets the needs of the present without endangering the needs of future generations. ...'

Sustainable development has four primary objectives:

- minimised risk of environmental damage arising from incomplete knowledge;
- ecological sustainability;
- socio/cultural sustainability; and
- economic sustainability.

Any action that promotes one of these objectives in a way that undermines the long term net viability of another is not sustainable development. (From Australian Procurement & Construction Council Inc, Asset Management 2001, <http://www.apcc.gov.au>, 2001)

It would be grossly remiss not to acknowledge the role of the Cultural Development Network in promoting cultural sustainability. The Network, through conferences such as this, through the publication of Jon Hawkes' important work and through constant lobbying of key bodies has done more than any to engage the cultural sector in the pursuit of the fourth pillar. Other social welfare, planning and policy organisations have also promoted the concept or incorporated the thinking behind cultural sustainability into their own agendas. Examples include the recent work by Jesuit Social Services in the area of community resilience. There is a growing recognition of the need to address the ongoing cultural strength of our communities and the nation as a whole, that has been reinforced by the economic theories of Richard Florida, who, regardless of the criticisms that are levelled at him, has placed culture squarely on the mainstream political and policy landscape.

Experience elsewhere suggests that the Australian system of government, with its traditional tensions between federal and state governments and bureaucracies, its duplication and its cost shifting, may be a barrier to broader implementation. The Canadian example of a national government setting out an agenda for renewal of cities throughout Canada or the capacity to implement universal sustainability requirements across local governments nationally (as occurs in New Zealand) would be difficult to replicate in Australia without cultural and political change on the part of the agencies concerned. Nevertheless there are many opportunities to contribute to the cultural sustainability of this country though they are reliant on first building a broad acceptance of the notion and what it means. Now that we understand what cultural sustainability is we can begin to find new ways of working together to achieve it.

As I've demonstrated (shortly) defining culture is a challenge in itself. We can get too focussed on it at the expense of the overall fourth pillar notion. I suspect there is more value in the consideration of the other component of the phrase, 'sustainability'. Sustainability, in its original incarnation as ecologically sustainable development, was a response to the realisation that the resources of the planet were finite. From this idea sprung the triple bottom line, expanding the scope of corporate responsibility to also include social impacts. The balance sheet metaphor of the triple (or quadruple) bottom-line provides a clear indicator of what is meant by sustainability. Quite simply sustainability means retaining assets or replacing expended assets so that risks are reduced and long-term viability is secured. On behalf of future generations it would seem the least we could aim for.

Culture, in a nutshell, is what defines us. Individually it helps us understand our place in the group. And as a group, or at least a multitude of interconnected groups, it identifies what we aspire to be. It is also the way we live our lives—the things we fill them with that give them meaning. It is not a singular thing but rather a constantly evolving web of activities and practices and understandings.

It contains not just the bits that we love to talk about as culture—arts and creativity, community engagement, and sport and recreation (even though we often include the last two as something of an afterthought). I suspect there's a cultural 'too hard basket' that actually contains some of the things that would be the first that someone from another place or time would consider when asked, what is Australia's culture like? Surely they'd talk about our political system and our system of trade and the way we record and report our stories. So why don't we include those things up front when we think about culture?

I think it is reasonable at this point to dare to imagine a cultural program that engages many thousands of young Australians

from across the country and from all walks of life in the pursuit of their creativity. It provides a platform for casual involvement but also for instruction, support and even professional opportunities for those who are identified through the process as having particular talents. It is demonstrably egalitarian and is broadly embraced by both active and passive participants alike.

For those who work tirelessly to engage the creative energies of people at a community level it's a tantalising proposition. But, of course, we don't have to imagine too hard—the example exists—it's called Australian Idol. It may not be a perfect vehicle for cultural development but to deny its significance would be foolish, and not because of its undisputed impact but because it would narrow, at the point where culture happens, the way we define it. The fact that *Idol* is driven by advertising and media industry concerns and is the local incarnation of a global formula should not diminish it as a cultural product.

But when we talk about culture we sometimes still shy away from accepting, as part of our culture, those elements that we feel are beyond our control, beyond the capacity to influence locally. That is a core challenge in a globalising world—one that we ignore at our peril ['ignore at our peril' - now there's a common phrase that really sums up sustainability]. I suspect its a point that other speakers might wish to contest but, as driving forces within the interconnected systems by which we organise ourselves politics, media and business are essentially cultural.

I'm not arguing that we should turn our attention away from the community strengthening and development roles that have been a significant part of cultural work in recent decades. But our frame of reference in understanding culture needs to recognise both local and global contexts. In fact, far from devaluing the role of cultural development practices, the fourth pillar brings culture, in all its manifestations, into the main flow of policy, creating for all cultural initiatives, including traditional community based activities, a position of strength. And a position of strength is a great place to start—which means I'm nearly done.

It leaves just one question... why all the nonsense about writing this presentation in reverse? Yes, it has been a conceit on my part to try to keep you all awake. And its success, I'll acknowledge, has been partial at best. But more importantly proceeding backwards is symbolic of our capacity to find new ways to conceive things across time—which is exactly what makes sustainability the challenge that it is. It obliges us to conceive the implications of our actions on a world we don't yet know. It inverts the tendency of policy to be essentially reactive and places it instead within the realm of imagination. At a time when so much of the policy agenda in Australia is regressive and insular or dominated by economic agendas, negotiating a course towards becoming truly sustainable as a nation in a sustainable world will require political dexterity, commitment and, quite possibly, a degree of good fortune.

Which brings me to the end of my story. The story I want to begin with. Like the murder scene at the start of some grainy film noir the end is often the best place to start. The story, of course, is topsy-turvy.

My son Thomas is fifty now and in my dotage I look back fondly on a point in time when I dared to imagine what his life would be like. The world today has a peculiar equilibrium. Sure there are problems, but that's life. We got together, nations and governments, and sorted out electricity generation and the internal combustion engine and temperatures are finally starting to stabilise. How could we have thought it would somehow solve itself?!

Even though the century got off to an inauspicious start, we held on to a core set of national values. Our democracy seems to survive whatever we throw at it. The new constitution has strengthened it after the protocols that held the old one together became so brittle. It acknowledges our past so that we can believe truly in who we are. It also incorporates a commitment to the future and makes it clear that the good life of all our generations is a goal of government beyond the goals of prosperity and care.

I love talking with my granddaughter now about her future. In between our gloating about the Bomber's 24th premiership she's been telling me about the stuff they do at school for Australian heritage. Republic day is coming up and she wants help designing a 'twenties costume to celebrate. I'm more comfortable now about the life she'll have because her community is strong. It provides her with lots to do, with friendship and support and with access to the creative expressions that chart her aspirations and those of her country.

Around the time of the global security scare, just when national politics seemed a darkly apprehensive thing, a model of considered action for the long-term good of the country emerged. It wasn't embraced immediately—old habits die hard—but it did influence leaders and influenced people, their constituents, to expect more from them. Maybe that was a turning point.

Anyway you know the rest of the story. In fact you know it backwards. Communications and IT in the 1990s, big hair and corporate greed in the eighties, disco and punk and a bloke called Gough, feminism, Vietnam, post war immigration, the second world war, depression, the first world war and federation. And that's just what we went through in one century. Before that booms and busts, gold-fever, exploration and expansion, penal settlement and through it all decade after decade of massacre,

displacement and exploitation.

And as the story concludes, right at the start of it all, there are, as in many works of literature, multiple endings. In one a large group of hardened men and women and a smallish band of soldiers, the last of their kind, load themselves into rickety square rigged boats and sail to an island near France. On disembarking they go about the populace performing acts of kindness and civic honour, returning handkerchiefs and small change into the pockets of unsuspecting merchants and restoring dishevelled officers of the crown to a state of regimental formality.

Another ending takes place not far from here. A family group breaks open oysters and mussels gathered that day. The kids can't sit still—they race around kicking up the dust and making a racket. But the older people relax. As they eat and talk they warm themselves around the coals on which eels are roasting. As the oily flesh of the fish singes it fills the air with a pungent reminder of the wonderful bounty of this place.

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