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The rise and fall of sustainability in Western Australian politics: a review of sustainable development under the Western Australian Labor government between 2001 and 2008

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This article addresses problems associated with the political operationalization of the sustainability agenda and the design of new development goals based on the case of Western Australia (WA). In this state, rapid economic development, long the key objective of successive governments, has caused serious environmental problems and brought into question the sustainability of the state's development path. In the 2001 WA state election, the Labor Party came into office in part because of its overt commitment to sustainable development, departing from past progrowth philosophies. This article analyzes the extent to which the WA Labor government was able to operationalize politically its sustainability agenda during its time in office between 2001 and 2008. It finds that despite a strong commitment to its sustainability agenda in the early years of holding office, the Labor government failed to institutionalize policy changes, which, following a 2006 leadership change, allowed for a reversal of progress. We then discuss the WA experience within the global policy context and place it within the larger debates on the operationalization of sustainability.

KEYWORDS: bureaucracy, political power, public policy, government programs, economic development, environmental protection

Australia illustrates in extreme form the exponentially accelerating horse race in which the world now finds itself…On the one hand, the development of environmental problems in Australia, as in the whole world, is accelerating exponentially. On the other hand, the development of public environmental concern, and of private and governmental countermeasures, is also accelerating exponentially. Which horse will win the race?

Jared Diamond, *Collapse*, 2005

Introduction

The notion of sustainability entered the international political scene only relatively recently. In the early 1970s, the idea of the also increasingly visible "limits to growth" (Meadows et al. 1972; Mesarovic & Pestel, 1974) began to challenge the until-then firmly embedded dogma of unbridled economic development that had been prevalent since the end of World War II. A decade later, the Brundtland Commission (WECD, 1987) provided a new normative frame that shaped contemporary discourses of development, marking the point at which the concept of sustainable development came to be embraced globally (Sneddon et al. 2006). That this new development perspective considered economic activity and environmental protection as complementary certainly contributed to its widespread appeal (Hunter, 2002). The political interpretation of sustainable development as mapped out in the Brundtland Report constituted a crucial global agreement serving as a foundation for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. This so-called "Earth Summit" launched the "sustainability decade" of the 1990s that saw much political and academic debate about the definition, nature, and operationalization of sustainable development (Lele, 1991; Commonwealth of Australia, 1992b; Hurka, 1992; Basagio, 1995; Shrivastava, 1995; United Nations, 1997; Neumayer, 1999).

By the turn of the millennium, sustainability discourse had become firmly embedded in policy documents around the world (Moran et al. 2008). This was coupled with the widespread adoption of sustainability principles in the commercial realm (WBCSD, 2000; 2002; Schaltegger et al. 2003; Kolk, 2004), amounting to what former British Prime Minister Tony Blair described as a "sustainability revolution" (Roosa, 2008). The burgeoning sustainability rhetoric seemed to promise a departure from the globally entrenched economic credo of growth at all cost, hailing a new era of development that balances economic, social, and environmental concerns. Recognition appeared to be growing for the need to shift, at least in the long term, patterns of production and consump-

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tion in all parts of society (Christie, 1994; Lafferty, 1996). However, the sustainability euphoria of the 1990s did not translate into the political and economic reforms pledged at the beginning of the decade as national and international politics, vested commercial interests, and political inertia stymied change (Paton, 2008; Beddoe et al. 2009). In fact, in most instances to date, efforts to implement sustainability principles at national and subnational levels continue to reflect a "business as usual" approach (Jordan, 2008) as opposed to widely called-for fundamental change (MEA, 2005; Adams, 2006; UNEP, 2007; Butler, 2008). Western Australia in this regard serves as an exemplar case to shed light on the problematic of shifting traditional development patterns onto a more sustainable trajectory. We will show that, while Australia has been an early adopter of sustainability rhetoric, policy implementation nationally and subnationally has proved slow, short-lived, and largely cosmetic.

In Australia during the 1990s, the idea of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) moved comparatively quickly onto the political center stage (Bührs & Aplin, 1999). Indeed, Australia was one of the world's first jurisdictions to formulate a *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development* (NSESD) (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992b) and to reach agreement nationwide to integrate the core objectives of sustainable development into more specific policies at the subnational level. It bears noting, however, that Australia's enthusiasm for sustainability faded at the federal level in the late 1990s, attracting much international criticism, especially in the context of climate-change negotiations (Kinrade, 1998; Mercer et al. 2007; Pearse, 2007).

In Western Australia (WA), the focal point of this article, the "sustainability revolution," was–albeit delayed–particularly pronounced, marked by the arrival of the newly elected Labor state government in 2001 with sustainability as its purported policy platform. This outcome coincided with the state becoming an internationally recognized hotspot for sustainability and environmental technology research (Cowan, 1999). The overt sustainability orientation of the incoming government was remarkable in that economic growth and the rapid development of the state have been the prime objectives of all WA administrations since European settlement (Walker et al. 2002).

The enduring prodevelopment stance across the political spectrum prior to 2001 reflected a view of WA as still being underdeveloped in large parts, with its physical environment in combination with its isolation and remoteness believed to impede social and economic development (Moon & Sharman, 2003). Industry sectors such as mining, timber production, and agriculture have traditionally driven the exploitation of WA's rich natural resource base with the economic policy support of successive state governments. However, the state's natural resource dependence, which is mirrored nationally (Fenna, 2004), has also posed challenges for WA's development (Beresford, 2001). The narrowness of the state's economic base not only made it vulnerable to external economic shocks, as evidenced by the most recent global economic downturn, it also incurred considerable environmental costs. The large-scale exploitation of the state's natural assets, unsustainable and often conflicting land-use practices, rapid population growth, and spiralling household consumption over time have resulted in water shortages, pollution, and the increasingly visible loss of biodiversity, as well as land degradation and dryland salinity (EPA, 2007a).

Diamond's (2005) "horse race," to be understood here as the intensifying contest between economic and ecological imperatives (Eckersley, 1992), has not only begun to pose real challenges to political decision making but also to threaten the ideological stronghold of developmentalism within WA state politics.[1] The rising tensions between the economic growth agenda and the need for environmental protection, however, are believed (at least by some theorists (e.g., Barbier 1987)) to be reconcilable to the notion of sustainable development through the joint optimization of social, economic, and environmental goals. Leaving aside the hotly debated interpretative pitfalls surrounding questions of what to sustain and how (see, for example, Daly, 1996; Gutés, 1996; Holland, 1997; Neumayer, 1999; Ayres et al. 2001), in its broader sense the sustainability concept was embraced by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in WA during its term in office between 2001 and 2008. Labor's open commitment to sustainability seemed to promise a departure from, and alternative to, the exploitative paradigm of incessant economic development, and it is Labor's delivery on this promise of change we take issue with here.

While recognizing the sustainability paradigm's broader dimensions (Giddings et al. 2002), in this article we map some of the Labor government's key environmental policy initiatives between 2001 and 2008. Specifically, we analyze the effectiveness of

[1]In the context of WA and Queensland, Kellow & Niemeyer (1999) characterize developmentalism as "proclivity for pursuing interventionist development policies to overcome their particular disadvantage, a tendency towards political conservatism and an ideational environment where development was seen as a panacea." Although "developmentalism" was employed as a tool for political analysis during the 1980s (Harman & Head, 1992), there is little evidence of research into the relationship between developmentalism and sustainability in general and the impacts on the environment in particular (Beresford, 2001).

Labor policies in terms of delivering a lasting break with the customary development-policy agenda, focusing on the government's ability to affect institutional change, provide political leadership, and achieve policy continuity. These are recognized as important ingredients for the successful integration of economic, social, and environmental considerations in policy and decision making (Ross & Dovers, 2006; 2008).

Given the breadth of the subject, the focus of this article is necessarily selective. Our analysis is based primarily on available literature and media, offering insights into key policy initiatives under Labor and advancing an argument about the Labor government's ability to embed the principles of sustainability into the structures and processes governing environmental policy making in WA. We begin by describing the national policy context and providing a brief overview of the state of the environment in WA. This discussion provides the requisite background for the ensuing review of Labor's efforts. We then use our findings to place the WA experience in the international policy context and help identify the obstacles to effective policy making for sustainability.

The Environmental Policy Context

Many external factors, often in complex interrelationship, significantly influence the form and dynamics of environmental policy. Features of the political system, historical developments, economic structure, demographic and sociocultural factors, as well as the geographical setting are all important determinants of any policy-making process. For WA, this means that policy making cannot be assessed in isolation but requires, for instance, reference to broader issues of environmental policy and politics at the national level. Some key developments in the national policy arena and their respective impacts on the state level are briefly addressed below.

Nationally, environmental concerns have stimulated much debate and created substantive potential for conflict over the philosophy of economic progress (Beder, 1996). The main political parties needed to respond to this growing debate, for they realized the electoral significance of environmental issues at both state and federal levels (Blackburn & Stone, 2003). The political responses, however, were frequently driven by opportunism in the lead up to elections and largely characterized by ad hocery and amnesia as opposed to integrative, active and adaptive planning (Dovers, 2000). In other words, environmental policies have come and gone, lacking alignment with other portfolios as well as inadequate continuity and consistency.

In WA, the dryland-salinity crisis in 1993 (see Beresford, 2001) and the native forest debate in the late 1990s (Barker & Bennett, 2001; Stone, 2001) are examples of environmental problems that became political battlegrounds (Black & Phillips, 2001; van Onselen, 2005). At the federal level, there is also a well-documented history of regularly arising tensions between the Commonwealth and the states and territories over environmental policy matters (Davis, 1989; Wescombe, 1990; Economou, 1992; Carron, 1993; Kellow, 1996; Dargavel, 1998; Lane, 1999; Slee, 2001). Overall, however, it is fair to suggest that many of these conflicts were not driven by assertions of political leadership or vision but by fear of potential voter backlash. While governments "greened up" to varying degrees during the 1980s and early 1990s (Dovers, 2002), their policy imperatives have remained firmly embedded in neoliberalism, economic growth, and development (Fenna, 2004; Mercer et al. 2007).

The state-federal tensions cited above, rooted in the fact that the Commonwealth holds external affairs and trade powers under the Australian Constitution, arose in response to a more prominent Commonwealth role in environmental policy matters. The High Court's broad interpretation of these powers (Section 51, xxix), based on international treaty commitments, led to centralized authority in policy areas originally not allocated to the Commonwealth. The application of these expanded federal powers became obvious in a number of environmental disputes around the country (e.g., Fraser Island, Franklin River, Coronation Hill) (Fenna, 2004). The resistance by state and territory governments to the Commonwealth's intervention in essentially local resource disputes was a matter of course.

The early 1990s, however, saw the beginning of a retreat by the Commonwealth, curtailing its natural resource-related responsibilities to that of a watchdog and facilitator (Lane, 1999). While some commentators criticized these self-imposed restrictions as a political cost-cutting exercise (Toyne, 1994; Sackville, 1995), the states welcomed the withdrawal of the Commonwealth and the devolution of environmental responsibilities. This devolutionary process was continued under the Howard coalition government between 1996 and 2007, albeit for different reasons (Crowley, 2002; Fenna, 2004).

It is the subject of much conjecture whether the devolution of Commonwealth powers was a sign of federal disengagement with environmental affairs or a pragmatic approach to addressing questions of environmental management and protection. Past engagements have certainly proven politically opportune but equally precarious in that previous federal elections had been lost over environmental conflicts. Also, the

handing back of environmental responsibilities to relatively poorly funded environmental state agencies may be a means of reducing the political influence of the environmental agenda. At the same time, such withdrawal could also be seen as consistent with calls for decentralized policy making under the banner of ecological modernization or Agenda 21, as well as a pragmatic step toward conflict resolution between state and Commonwealth governments (United Nations, 1993; Dovers, 1996; Dryzek, 1997; Gibbs, 2000). Irrespective, the winding back of environmental responsibilities to the subnational level not only renewed the states' obligations to fulfill their traditional role in environmental policy but also allowed them to engage more directly with local environmental issues virtually free from Commonwealth interference.

The State of WA's Environment

WA is recognized internationally for its richness in unique, often endemic and mega-diverse terrestrial and marine flora and fauna (Beard et al. 2000; Shepherd et al. 2002; CALM, 2004, DSEWPC, 2011). At the same time, the state's extremely diverse ecological systems are vulnerable and highly susceptible to change, placing them at risk from anthropogenic impacts that continue to increase (GWA, 1992; DEP, 1998; EPA, 2007).

WA's most recent State of the Environment (SoE) report (EPA, 2007b) shows a highly mixed scorecard, depicting, despite isolated improvements, a state of environmental decline. In what follows, we address a selection of priority areas (EPA, 2007b), namely climate change and greenhouse-gas emissions, population and consumption, as well as salinization of land and inland waters. These are environmental issues that, due to their extent; degree of irreversibility; rate of deterioration; or overall social, economic, or environmental impact demand policy development, management focus, and resource allocation. Previous SoE reports had already shown these priority areas to be of concern in light of worsening trends (GWA, 1992; DEP, 1998).

Climate Change and Greenhouse-Gas Emissions

Today, climate change–while still highly politicized in Australia (Hamilton, 2010)–is an internationally recognized phenomenon (CSIRO, 2007; IPCC, 2007a), and the release of greenhouse gases and their effects on climatic stability are a key concern (IPCC, 2007b). In WA, greenhouse-gas emissions increased 45% between 1990 and 2005 (land-use concessions excluded) (EPA, 2007a), amounting to the highest per capita emissions in both the country and the world and falling well outside the 8% increase allowed under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (United Nations, 1997; Turton, 2002). The state's overall emissions are expected to increase further in spite of a required 60% reduction by 2050 (CSIRO, 2007; IPCC, 2007a). Thus, a tremendous challenge lies ahead in light of the energy- and resource-intensive nature of the WA economy (Higham & Verstegen, 2006), the implications of which are highlighted in the on-going debate over carbon taxation and a national emissions-trading scheme (Garnaut, 2008a; 2008b; Moran, 2010).

These unprecedented emission levels are especially disconcerting given that future climate change is expected to be costly for WA in environmental, social, and economic terms. As the state is predicted to become warmer and dryer (ABS, 2003a; CSIRO, 2007), climate change has serious implications not only for biodiversity and freshwater availability but also for economic sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and tourism (EPA, 2007a).

Population and Consumption

Population growth and consumption are fundamental drivers of environmental decline in WA. The state's population has grown steadily from around 450,000 in the 1940s to two million in 2005 (EPA, 2007a). WA's current population growth rate of around 2.3% is higher than the national average and also higher than that of most developed and some developing nations due to natural increases as well as overseas and interstate migration (EPA, 2007a; ABS, 2008a; 2008b). This level of growth is expected to continue into the future (EPA, 2007a).

Both population growth and (over)consumption drive the demand for natural resources and lead to increases in waste generation and pollution (ABS, 2008b). Per capita consumption in WA is rated among the highest in the world, resulting from the combination of a resource-intensive state economy, high standard of living, and consumption-oriented culture (Watkins, 2005). Consequently, WA's ecological footprint per capita of around 14.7 hectares dwarfs the national average of seven hectares and compares poorly with the sustainable per capita footprint of an estimated 1.88 hectares (Worldwatch Institute, 2004; Higham & Verstegen, 2006; EPA, 2007a). The state's predicted future economic expansion and population growth are expected to add further consumption, creating more pressure on already stressed environmental systems.

Salinization of Land and Inland Waters

The salinization of land and water resources is a long-standing environmental problem in WA (Briggs, 1996). Inappropriate land-use and irrigation patterns have increased the scale and extent of dryland salin-

ity, adversely affecting biodiversity, agricultural productivity, and infrastructure. At present, 75% of Australia's dryland-salinization problem is in WA, affecting 51% of all farms over an area of about 1.2 million hectares (ABS, 2003b). The extent of salt-affected land continues to worsen in many areas at an estimated annual economic cost of US$664 million nationally. In WA, the salinity impacts on road and rail infrastructure are expected to double over the next 50 years (EPA, 2007a).

The above examples illustrate some of the key environmental challenges for the state and its political decision makers. WA's environmental trends, which are mirrored both nationally and internationally, highlight the scope of, and indeed the need for, effective environmental policy making (ABS, 2006; Beeton et al. 2006; UNEP, 2007). This perceived need explains our interest in what promised to be a new approach to environmental policy making heralded by the Labor Party at the 2001 state election to which we now turn our attention.

The 2001 election in WA was decided in part by the rival parties' stance on environmental issues. The Labor Party campaigned strongly on environmental grounds, promising, *inter alia*, the cessation of old-growth forest logging in the state's southwestern region, the continuation of a ban on uranium mining, and the tackling of the state's worsening water crisis. The Labor Party also committed itself to the development and implementation of a state sustainability strategy, meant to provide the framework for future policy making. The "greenness" of Labor's electoral victory in 2001 is contested territory (Walsh, 2001), since its "landslide" win was primarily the result of the allocation of preferences under the alternative vote electoral system, with the Greens attracting many of the primary votes (Stone, 2001). Nonetheless, Labor arguably came into office in part because of its environmental policy platform that seemed to promise a departure from past progrowth philosophies premised on economic-ecological tradeoffs to a new era of environmental policy making.

The circumstances appeared favorable, with the right ingredients for environmental policy success. The leader of the newly elected Labor government entered office with an already articulated reform agenda (Gallop, 1998) ready for implementation at a time when environmental issues were prominent in WA and the federal government's "hands off" approach facilitated devolution of environmental responsibilities to the state. This alignment of factors arguably bode well for the pursuit of political change and the embedding of sustainability principles across government.

Labor's Taste for Sustainability between 2001 and 2005

Following its 2001 win, the Gallop-led Labor government moved quickly on its environmental promises, keen to promote its commitment to sustainability and political will to operationalize the concept at the government level and across the state. We address below several flagship initiatives, namely old-growth forest logging, Ningaloo Reef, and the State Sustainability Strategy, that were all government initiatives meant to mark the arrival of a new environmental politics (Carpenter, 2006).

Old-Growth Forest Logging

Since the 1960s, native forest logging has been politically contentious both nationally and in WA (Carron, 1985; Penna, 1987; Mercer, 1995). The federal government's Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process, which grew out of the National Forest Policy Statement in 1992, was meant to end the long-running forest dispute. The RFAs were purported to deliver forest conservation, ecologically sustainable forest management, and development of sustainable and internationally competitive native timber production (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992a).

In WA, however, the RFA process derailed in the late 1990s because of public outrage over ongoing old-growth forest logging as well as the science and the unpublic nature of the RFA proceedings (Horwitz & Calver, 1998; Westpoll, 1998; AMR: Quantum Harris, 1999; Brueckner & Horwitz, 2005; Brueckner et al. 2006). Despite "green" amendments by the Court Coalition government to the original RFA document only eight weeks after it had been signed, the public credibility of the RFA could not be rescued. The protracted RFA process left the Liberal party internally fractured (Grove, 1999; Martin, 1999), which not only led to a split of the party with the formation of the "Liberals for Forests" but also provided a considerable advantage for Labor's forest-policy platform at the 2001 polls (Blackburn & Stone, 2003).

Following Labor's 2001 electoral victory, old-growth-forest logging was effectively banned in 99% of remaining old-growth areas. Also, new areas of old-growth forest were identified and 30 new national parks were established for biodiversity protection. The resultant reduction in timber availability for industry and the concomitant social fallout were offset by an industry-restructuring package and worker-assistance program (Miller, 2004). Conflict over commercial timber production and forest protection is ongoing (Musselwhite & Herath, 2005; CCWA, 2006; 2008). Nonetheless, Labor's "heroic" policy intervention helped quell public disquiet over forestry

issues, which contributed to the demise of the previous Court Coalition government (Newman, 2004).

Saving Ningaloo Reef

The decision to "save Ningaloo" was another key Labor initiative, which, seemingly consistent with its election promise to work toward greater reef-area protection, helped cement the party's environmental credentials during its early years in office. Located 1,132 kilometers (km) north of WA's capital city, Perth, the Ningaloo reef is an almost pristine 230 km long part-fringing and part-barrier reef, lying offshore on the western side of the North West Cape Peninsula.[2] While remote and relatively uninhabited, the area has been experiencing rapid growth in visitor numbers over the last fifteen years. While the expansion of tourism has enhanced the region's economic profile, it has also increased pressures on the fragile reef ecosystem (Wood & Hughes, 2006).

Against this background, Coral Coast Marina Development had been seeking approval for a number of years to develop a 2,500-bed resort-style marina at Maud's Landing, which is situated three kilometers north of the existing township of Coral Bay adjacent to the Ningaloo Marine Park. Despite heated debate and public agitation over the proposed development, the project was widely believed to have the go ahead in light of two existing approvals by the state's Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). Yet, in response to considerable national, international, and celebrity intervention (Gilles et al. 2004), as well as environmental concerns raised by the independent Appeals Committee, the WA state government rejected the proposal (Gallop, 2003b). In July 2003, the WA Premier, Geoff Gallop, announced that the development at Maud's Landing would not proceed because the "proposed Coral Coast Resort [was deemed] environmentally unacceptable" (Gallop, 2003a). Subsequently, a regional plan was developed for Ningaloo that established legislative requirements (Statement of Planning Policy and an Interim Development Order) to protect the Ningaloo area. The government formed the Ningaloo Sustainable Development Committee charged with planning and decision-making responsibilities for the region. Also, funding for the management of the area's marine and terrestrial environments was increased.

The government's decision was a win for the local communities and the "mum and dad style popular movement" (Morton, 2003) that for many years had been lobbying intensively against the proposed marina development. Even though continued planning is needed in the face of growing tourism-related pressures and an increasingly complex coastal development context in Western Australia, where interests compete for control over coastal resources, it is now widely perceived that Ningaloo is in safe hands because of Labor's intervention. Other controversial development proposals such as Smiths Beach, Port Coogee, and Leighton Beach also turned into strongly contested "battlefields" of the traditional development mentality and its associated transformation of the coast versus a less commercial vision for WA's coastlands (Pforr et al. 2007; Wesley & Pforr, 2008; 2010).

The State Sustainability Strategy

Arguably, Labor's most widely applauded achievement at the time, in terms of its sustainability initiatives, was the development of Australia's first State Sustainability Strategy that was intended to form an integral part of a larger sustainable development governance framework (GWA, 2003). The Strategy was launched in September 2003 (more than a decade after the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992b) was released) and hailed as a "trail-blazing blueprint" and an exemplar for other states and countries (Davidson, 2004). Developed in partnership between the state government and local universities, the Strategy provided numerous avenues for public input via a series of civic seminars and a period for citizen comment on a public consultation paper and a draft state sustainability strategy (Newman, 2005). The process was designed to be participatory and premised on newly developed guidelines for community engagement (DPC, 2002; 2003), marking a shift toward more collaborative policy making and negotiated policy outcomes (McGrath et al. 2004). The proceedings were overseen by the Sustainability Policy Unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, established in 2001 soon after the state election (Hartz-Karp & Newman, 2006).

The Strategy was designed to focus government thinking on sustainability issues and to provide a platform for the integration of environmental protection, social advancement, and economic prosperity. A shift in policy direction was envisioned based on a change in language, thinking, and culture with a view to making sustainability a lived reality across government and society (Newman, 2005). At its core, the Strategy described how the state and its agencies could adopt a sustainability framework and provide leadership in supporting a transition to a sustainable

[2] Fringing reefs are coral structures that are attached to the mainland, following a shore from beach to beach and thus creating a chain of reefs. In contrast, barrier reefs are reefs separated from a mainland or island shore.

future in partnerships with local government, industry, and nongovernmental organizations. Widely supported by environmentalists, politicians, and business leaders both nationally and internationally, the Strategy placed WA center stage in the global sustainability arena and marked a highpoint for sustainability initiatives within the state (Newman, 2005). Also, a range of other sustainability initiatives were sparked by, or accompanied the development of, the Strategy, such as the Dialogue with the City[3] and the WA Collaboration[4] that sought to mainstream the sustainability agenda and foster community engagement and cross-sectoral collaboration (Hodgson et al. 2005).

A Change of Direction after the 2005 Elections

Compared to 2001, far less attention was paid to environmental issues during the 2005 state election (Black & Phillips, 2005; Rootes, 2005), arguably due to the absence of iconic issues such as ending old-growth logging or protecting the Ningaloo Reef (Weber, 2005). While water security promised to be a key election issue, the water debate derailed, with the focus shifted onto a blunder by opposition leader Colin Barnett (Rootes, 2005). Overall, the broader sustainability agenda in the state had lost momentum within the context of a largely muted environmental debate nationally (Dovers, 2002), falling behind issues such as health, education, and the economy (Black & Phillips, 2005). On election day, while the Green vote collapsed, the Labor government was re-endorsed despite have being touted as the highest taxing and least popular state government in the country and trailing in the polls in the lead up to the election (Green, 2004; van Onselen, 2005).

In January, 2006, the office of WA's Premier changed when Geoff Gallop, suffering from depression, surprisingly resigned from politics while at the zenith of his career (Steketee, 2006; Mackerras, 2007). Gallop's office was taken over by Alan Carpenter, who had served previously as State Development Minister and whose prodevelopment stance would affect Labor's approach to the environment. Only days later, Environment Minister Judy Edwards resigned from office, which set in train a succession of ministerial appointments to the environmental portfolio between 2006 and 2008. These two years were distinguished by growing criticism from environmental groups regarding environmental policy making in the state, the character of which had changed from visionary to reluctant and reactive. Overall, Labor's environmental credentials–once considered trail-blazing (Davidson, 2004)–became increasingly eroded on a number of fronts, some of which we elaborate on below.

One such example was the lead-pollution incident in Esperance in early 2007 that resulted in the mass die-off of birds caused by dust escaping during loading of Magellan Metals products at the Esperance Port. Subsequent testing revealed elevated levels of lead in the blood of some Esperance community members, including children (Phillips & Kerr, 2008). An inquiry by the Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Education and Health uncovered major failings and shortcomings in the industry-regulation function of the Department of Environment and Conservation and other regulatory agencies that led to the exposure of workers and the community to unacceptable and avoidable health and environmental risks (Education and Health Standing Committee, 2007; Taylor, 2007). The Esperance incident fueled perceptions of the government and its agencies' growing inability to adequately monitor and control industrial activities, perceptions the government sought to counter by increasing the number of environmental department staff (ABC News, 2007).

Another example of environmental retreat was the ongoing debate over protection of the banded ironstone formation (BIF) ranges that are part of an isolated ancient landscape rich in minerals and thus earmarked for future mining activity (CCWA, 2008). In response to growing pressure from conservationists and its own departments, the Carpenter government commissioned a report on biodiversity-conservation requirements in the BIF ranges of the Yilgarn Craton in the state's Midwest and Goldfields regions. The interim report by the Department of Environment and Conservation (2007) highlighted the region's significant biodiversity values, recommending that up to 60% of the ranges be preserved and that flora and fauna be protected from development by establishing Class A reserves and national parks.[5] The Department warned in its interim report that in the absence of a "strategic approach to resource utilization and biodiversity conservation" both "EPA and [the] government [would] face an increasing and dif-

[3] The Dialogue with the City was an attempt to give citizens a unique opportunity to contribute to the creation of a planning vision and strategy to guide Perth's future growth and development over the next two decades with the objective of making Perth the world's most liveable city by 2030.

[4] The WA Collaboration sought to progress sustainability through partnership and deliberative democracy. It was founded in 2002 as a multistakeholder nongovernmental organization with the aim of fostering a grassroots dialogue about sustainability in WA.

[5] Class A reserves are the most protected type of public land and marine areas in WA, as reservation status can only be lifted with the consent of both houses of parliament. Reserves are established for different purposes, such as the creation of conservation parks, national parks, or nature reserves.

ficult challenge in addressing cumulative environmental impacts" should mining activities proceed in the region (DEC, 2007). Despite these warnings, and in the context of a growing number of mining proposals, the Carpenter government did not follow through with the proposed preservation of the area. This in turn gave rise to concerns about the government's seeming protection of short-term resource interests over internationally unique landscapes and biodiversity values.

Finally, the release of WA's third State of the Environment (SoE) report provided a good opportunity for the Carpenter government to mark the progress made within the environmental portfolio (EPA, 2007a). The State Sustainability Strategy reinforced the importance of environmental monitoring and reporting efforts that had been underway in WA since the 1990s, stressing the need for government to "provide community access to the latest research and data…to enable improved land management" (GWA, 2003). Surprisingly, the launch of the SoE report was left to EPA, and to this date no formal response has been given by government and the EPA recommendations have not been implemented (CCWA, 2008). This turn of events raised doubts over the government's commitment to the SoE reporting process that in earlier years was purported to be a cornerstone of Labor's environmental policy framework and the key mechanism for reporting on the state's environmental bottom line (Edwards, 2003).

In the lead up to the 2008 state election, Labor refocused attention onto environmental issues. The Carpenter government pledged an extra US$32 million over four years to protect what was referred to as WA's environmental icons, earmarking funding for the Kimberly, the Great Western Woodlands, and the marine environment. Also, extra incentives were pledged for renewable power sources such as wind, solar, wave, and geothermal. At the same time, the electorate was warned of the Liberal Party's environmental platform that included the future prospect of uranium mining and the introduction of genetically modified food crops (ABC News, 2008). In contrast, the Liberal Party focused on Labor's alleged environmental policy failures, citing a confused and disjointed approach to water policy, dishonesty in connection with claims about the carbon neutrality of the Kwinana desalination plant, and a host of failures in energy and salinity management (The Liberal Party (WA), 2008).

In the end, however, the environment did not feature as a key issue for the two major parties during the election that saw a return of a Liberal-National Coalition government and the end of Labor's seven years in office. It is remarkable that in the 2008 state election campaign global environmental issues such as climate change, although a key election issue during the federal election in 2007, did not feature prominently. Notably, however, the Green vote recovered from the electoral defeat of 2005, achieving the party's best outcome to date.

Environmental Policy Under Labor: Unfinished Business or Reversal to Developmentalism?

Labor came to power in 2001 with a strong commitment to advance sustainability in WA by showing both leadership and vision. Following the launch of the State Sustainability Strategy in 2003 and the unexpected departure of Geoff Gallop two years later, however, the reform agenda lost thrust. Labor's Sustainability Strategy proposed over 330 specific actions to be undertaken across the whole of government, illustrating how agencies were to include sustainability considerations in their planning, policies, and decision-making processes (GWA, 2003). However, the Strategy remained a statement of intent only (Mercer & Marden, 2006), described as "just words" by political opponents (Phillips & Kerr, 2005). The criticisms were directed at Labor's failure to enact sustainability legislation. We concur with the critique that this failure left government agencies without requisite support for the operationalization of the sustainability principles espoused in the Strategy and provided insufficient stimulus for the implementation of sustainability initiatives across government, industry, and the wider community. This outcome mirrors the status of the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development that also was derided as a mere wish list in the mid-1990s (Wilkenfeld et al. 1995; ACF, 2006).

The Carpenter government disbanded the Sustainability Round Table after only a few years of existence. This forum comprised representatives from government agencies, community, and industry and was intended to offer advice to the Premier and to conduct a biennial review of the State Sustainability Strategy. Similarly, the Carpenter government demoted the Sustainability Policy Unit that was meant to ensure a whole-of-government approach. The unit was moved from the Premier's to the Environment portfolio, rebadged as the Sustainable Programs Unit, and repackaged together with the Waste Management Branch and the Community Education Programs into the department's Sustainability Division. As the Strategy was premised on active leadership by both premier and cabinet, it became apparent, along with the removal of other cornerstones of Labor's sustainable development governance framework, that enthusiasm for sustainability had waned.

Despite the development of a comprehensive sustainability strategy and the establishment of a

range of coordination and implementation mechanisms to facilitate policy integration across all government agencies (e.g., Sustainability Code of Practice for Government Agencies) during Labor's first term, these measures ultimately turned out to be temporary due to a lack of administrative stability and an absence of continuing strong political leadership (Ross & Dovers, 2008). Thus, we argue that one of the great failures of the Gallop administration's sustainable development approach was its inability to maintain initial momentum by adjusting institutional arrangements and introducing legislative change. Such measures would have helped cement the sustainability agenda, protect the vision, and withstand less supportive policy environments that come with changes of government. A long-term commitment to such a complex and wide-ranging initiative is essential to overcome the many "sources of 'unsustainability' [that] are deeply embedded within not only the prevailing policy and institutional contexts but also within the structures of the society as a whole" (Pope & Grace, 2006).

Also, while important, Labor's flagship initiatives described above strike as largely symbolic in nature and as politically opportunistic. So-called "bold" or politically courageous decisions were made in areas of little or dwindling economic importance for the state against the backdrop of significant public agitation, as was the case with the old-growth debate and the Ningaloo conflict (Newman, 2004). The forestry sector in WA has been in a state of decline for many years (ABARE, 1990; 1998; NFI, 1998). Consequently, a reduction in timber availability posed little political threat, especially in light of strong pro-forest sentiments among Perth-based voters. Similarly, the Ningaloo Reef area, while an increasingly popular tourist destination, contributed comparatively little to state revenue (Wood & Hughes, 2006). At the same time, the high public profile the area received during the Save Ningaloo campaign harbored the risk of an electoral backlash should the marina development have been allowed to proceed.

Even popular, proconservation decisions such as these, however, were not without tradeoffs. On one hand, both old-growth forests and the Ningaloo Reef area were protected from uncontrolled economic exploitation, while, on the other hand, equally controversial, yet economically more attractive, projects were approved. To illustrate, shortly after old-growth logging was effectively banned in native forests, sand mining in the Ludlow Tuart Forest was allowed to proceed.[6] Similarly, following the decision to "save" Ningaloo, the Gorgon gas project off the Pilbara coast received ministerial permission.[7] Moreover, unpopular decisions by the Ministry for the Environment were followed by new appointments to the portfolio, blurring lines of accountability.

Decisions under the Gallop government that on their face seemed politically courageous did not receive adequate follow up. The State Sustainability Strategy, for example, was a government initiative that–if implemented–would have required far-reaching policy reform and substantial legislative support. However, despite much fanfare surrounding its launch, the operationalization of the Strategy, as indicated above, was not pursued in earnest and was ultimately shelved by the Carpenter government. In this context, commenting more broadly on the Labor government's political reforms, Hodgkinson (2006) speaks of "compromises and a degree of accommodation." A similar argument can be advanced in connection with Labor's policy approach to the environment, especially during its later years in government. In connection with WA's rapidly expanding economy, Gallop's initial reform agenda was viewed as increasingly at odds with business interests keen to reduce bureaucratic red tape and fast track development approval (Hobbs, 2008). This observation, in turn, may help explain accusations of a "soft touch" on the resource sector and a string of decisions or lack thereof, which served to advance the development agenda (Phillips & Kerr, 2005).

Speculation aside, a substantial shift occurred in both rhetoric and policy following the 2006 leadership handover. While the early years under the Gallop government seemed to signal a sincere, albeit populist, attempt at governance for sustainability, Labor's second term saw a reversal to a policy approach more akin to the kind the party campaigned against in 2001. The Gallop government, while forced to make political compromises, was overall committed to its sustainability agenda and largely true to its postulated reform program (Gallop, 1998). With Gallop's departure, Labor lost its sustainability champion along with stability and continuity in the cabinet ranks. Labor's new "prodevelopment" premier not only dropped the sustainability agenda but also undid a series of policy measures implemented under Gallop such as the abandonment of the Sustainability Roundtable and the sustainability unit in

[6] Tuart trees (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) are endemic to WA and limited in their distribution along the coastal plain in the south-western part of the state. The Ludlow Tuart Forest is the only remaining Tall Tuart Forest in the world, which is why local conservation groups widely criticized the government's approval to grant sand mining in the area.

[7] The US$43 billion Gorgon liquefied natural gas project off the north coast of Western Australia was, at the time, the country's largest natural resources project in history. The project was controversial due to its siting on Barrow Island, a Class A nature reserve area with sensitive flora and fauna.

the Premier's Department (Lewis & Laurie, 2006; Morgan et al. 2006) as well as failed to reduce WA's dependence on fossil fuels, instead proposing additional coal-fired power stations in the state's southwest. Due to the failure to institutionalize Labor's first-term changes, much progress could be stopped, even reversed, allowing for a return to development and growth-oriented policy prescriptions.

Many of WA's environmental conflicts in recent decades have been based on a public reaction to, and rejection of, the development agenda of successive state governments. Despite increasing environmental stakes, environmental issues have routinely been relegated to the political backburner during the state's resource boom of the past decade (EPA, 2007a). Similarly, social problems are also on the rise in the face of mounting evidence that WA's recent boom times failed to deliver on its promises, experienced most by the vulnerable communities in WA's rural and remote areas (Denniss, 2007; Carney, 2008a; 2008b).[8] In other words, the state's triple bottom line is becoming increasingly unbalanced, raising grave concern about the long-term sustainability of WA's development path. Also, there are no visible signs of change in direction despite EPA's persistent warnings about the unsustainability of the state's growing population and development-driven environmental impacts (EPA, 2007a). As recently as April 2010, on the eve of a new resource boom, calls were made by industry interests to increase the state's population by 70,000 people per year to meet the projected labor demand of 400,000 people by 2016 (Phaceas, 2010). Returning to Diamond's (2005) analogy, the "horse race" continues and political responses in WA, after a temporary lead, trail behind accelerating environmental changes. A new political "heroism" may be needed to overcome the economic-ecological dichotomy that undermines efforts to harmonize economic development with social and environmental health. Labor thus far had seemed to be the state's best bet (no pun intended) to achieve this objective. Yet, the return to developmentalism in WA seems complete.

Conclusion: Western Australia's Experience in the Global Context

The WA experience is mirrored nationally and internationally, where political enthusiasm for sustainable development has ebbed and flowed considerably over the last twenty years. At present, despite rapidly growing social and environmental stakes (MEA, 2005; Beeton et al., 2006; UNEP, 2007; Worldwatch Institute, 2009), sustainability per se seems to have been relegated again to the "political backburner," overshadowed by economic concerns triggered by the ongoing global financial crisis. Indeed, the market meltdown seems to have intensified political resolve internationally to press ahead with conventional progrowth policy prescriptions. The seeming intensification of neoliberal economic globalization also appears to have tightened what has been called the "ideological and epistemological straightjackets" that have militated thus far against cohesive and politically effective interpretations of sustainable development (Sneddon et al. 2006). Instead of reforming the management of globalization and mitigating its side effects, there is much renewed political determination to persist with orthodox market-based approaches to policy making (Stiglitz, 2010). In the case of WA, the answer to the economic slowdown appears to be the intensification of natural resource extraction as evidenced by record numbers of resource-development approvals (Roarty, 2010).

While political and commercial decision makers still widely employ the language of sustainability, the focus seems to have shifted, with the sustainability message translated, redefined, and simplified. To illustrate, major corporations increasingly address sustainability concerns under the banner of corporate social responsibility (CSR), using both concepts interchangeably despite stark differences in their respective roots and orientation (Rondinelli & Berry, 2000; Schmitt, 2005; Wolff & Barth, 2005; Gustavson, 2008; Málovics et al. 2008).[9] Similarly, in the political realm, sustainability is now broadly being captured by the international climate-change debate, leaving little room for other socioecological concerns and problems (Paton, 2008). In other words, despite an ever-growing need for serious engagement with sustainable development, the sustainability agenda finds itself subsumed by other concepts and issues.

To our reading, the simplification and apparent subordination of the sustainability agenda not only bespeaks a certain imaginative poverty in policy making (Paton, 2008), but it is also broadly reflective of a lack of critical engagement with sustainable development per se. The state of play in WA is mirrored also in other state jurisdictions and countries such as the United Kingdom (HM Government,

[8] Due to the resources boom, recent years saw a discernible rise in homelessness because of reduced housing affordability, a marked increase in the uptake of social services in the face of rising costs of living, as well as growing family and community impacts associated with fly in-fly out employment practices in the resources sector (e.g., Denniss, 2007; WACOSS, 2008).

[9] Originally, sustainability was overtly ecological in nature while CSR was born out of ethical concerns about the social impacts of business conduct. Recent controversial resource-development projects in WA have been defended on the basis of proponents' good CSR practices with effective sustainability outcomes implied (see Barnett, 2010).

2005; Mercer & Marden, 2006; Mercer et al. 2007) and indicates a political approach to sustainable development that ignores its complexities and instead presents it as an unproblematic concept aligned with orthodox growth and development (Connelly, 2007). This in turn makes sustainability prone to "hijacking" and "abuse" by political and commercial interests, a phenomenon widely lamented in the literature (Lafferty & Langhelle, 1999; Beder, 2000; Mittlin, 2001). Thus, without critical engagement with the sustainability problematic and needed reflection on the values and ideologies behind many of today's pressing social and environmental concerns, effective sustainability policy making is likely to remain a distant reach. While charismatic leadership and personal convictions helped challenge engraved policy approaches to development and environmental protection in WA–at least temporarily–the case described here attests to the need for more far-reaching economic and political changes to make possible a lasting break with developmentalism and to enable a shift toward more sustainable trajectories.

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