

NIEL & NIEA Networking Meeting
Right vs Right: When There Are Two Environmentally Sound, But
Opposing, Solutions
March 30th 2010

BACKGROUND

In our increasingly complex and interconnected world, we have to deal with complicated decisions about environmental matters, with the debates and discussions on these matters often becoming divisive, or leading to conflict or protracted stalemate. The reason for division in decision making is more often than not related to the difficulty in achieving consensus in matters intersecting economic, environmental and social domains. To balance a divergence of interest we must learn respectful, participatory and democratic ways of communicating, engaging, negotiating and resolving environmental conflicts. The key is communication and consensus building.

KEY POINTS

Sue Christie

Representing a wide array of environmental organisations NIEL effectively operates a balancing act to try and reach a consensus view between members and that has to be balanced against economic and social arguments. Our primary goal is to reach consensus but that isn't always possible

Noel Bell – The Roe Valley Hydro Restoration Scheme

- Roe valley could be the benchmark for future river renewable ventures
- The extent of legislation and modification of project design to enable implementation is complex and ongoing (from 2006)
- Implementing renewable projects must integrate conservational interests

Paul Davison – Water Treatment Standards vs Climate Change Targets

- Water is the new oil and carbon its currency
- Increasing Water Quality = Increasing Carbon Footprint = Atmospheric Degradation
- As a society we are wholly addicted to carbon, 'so kicking the habit is a big issue for us', as people and as an industry for water treatment
- To beat the carbon addiction the water industry must become increasingly sustainable
- As a company Northern Ireland Water (NIW) must turn their waste into another mans raw materials, i.e. oil greases, energy, nutrients, fats, etc must be reused
- NIW has the potential to become carbon positive

Angus McRobert – The Marine Current Turbine

- Strangford encapsulates almost every conservation designation known in Northern Ireland
- Subsequently the potential implementation of SeaGen involved a stakeholder consultation of government departments, eNGOs and the public
- An Environmental Impact Assessment was conducted to gauge all physical, biological and ambient effects of implementation
- As a novel project adaptive management allowed implementation to proceed on an iterative level

Malachy Conway – To excavate or Not to Excavate

- Excavations are at the same time destructive and informative
- At a site due to be destroyed excavation is vindicated, but a site not under threat?
- Excavating can provide the last chance to glean from the past

DEBATE – THIS HOUSE BELIEVES THAT ELECTRIC VEHICLES SHOULD BE AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF A SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT SYSTEM FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Against the motion – Peter Lipman (Sustrans)

For the motion – Terry Waugh (Action Renewables)

◆ *Peter Lipman*

The current transport systems are deeply environmentally damaging to our personal and mental health: for years we have been pursuing ever increasing levels of mobility rather than accessing the things we need for our daily lives. Huge behavioural changes are required as we (the UK) do not have the money or fossil energy to install new infrastructure for electric vehicles.

◆ *Terry Waugh*

A sustainable transport system consists of strengthening and replacing the current system with a more fuel efficient, space saving and healthier alternative. According to the DRD – from the period 1992-2008 – the licensed vehicle stock in Northern Ireland has increased 42%. Northern Ireland does not have a sustainable transport system, with the majority of the population relying on private transport to live and work. Consequently, in Northern Ireland electric vehicles must play a part in our future.

Peter's rebuttal:

Terry mentioned that sustainable transport is any form of transport with a low impact on the environment, however, with electric vehicles over 40% of their lifetime carbon footprint derives from their production. Therefore establishing a fleet of electric vehicles to replace the current combustible engine fleet is not feasible.

Terry's rebuttal:

Electric cars per mile uses half the resources of a combustible vehicle, and electric vehicles can be powered by green energy and can have a lifetime of over 1 million miles.

Peter's final response:

Electric vehicles support more road building, and enable people to travel further and faster, I personally believe it is the wrong direction; we will have to move to living more local lives, with electric public transport providing a more sustainable mode of transport.

Terry's final response:

I am a realist, and if you think people will change behaviour in NI - and this debate is about NI - over next 20 years, it just won't happen - we have to deal with what we've got now, car manufacturers are climbing on board, mechanism of converting internal engine to electrical, infinitely better for environment and if that's what we have to deal with, then we have to go with it.

CROSSING THE ISSUES

The topics explored throughout this conference epitomise the divergence of opinion that exists in decision making, it is how we balance this divergence and reach a consensus where one party does not feel left in the dark. The key is striking a balance that is beneficial to the economy, the environment and to society. We have a long way to go, and do not have the necessary mechanisms to effectively resolve conflicts and produce a balanced outcome. The idea of adaptive management being used throughout the MCT project is one potential route to explore in resolving some environmental conflicts, primarily as it is a 'learn as we go' integrative and iterative process.

That we are aware of the limits of natural resources, of our increasing ability to negatively affect the environment, and that we often find ourselves at a deadlock in environmental decision making proves at the very least that we value the environment enough to 'fight' for its interests.