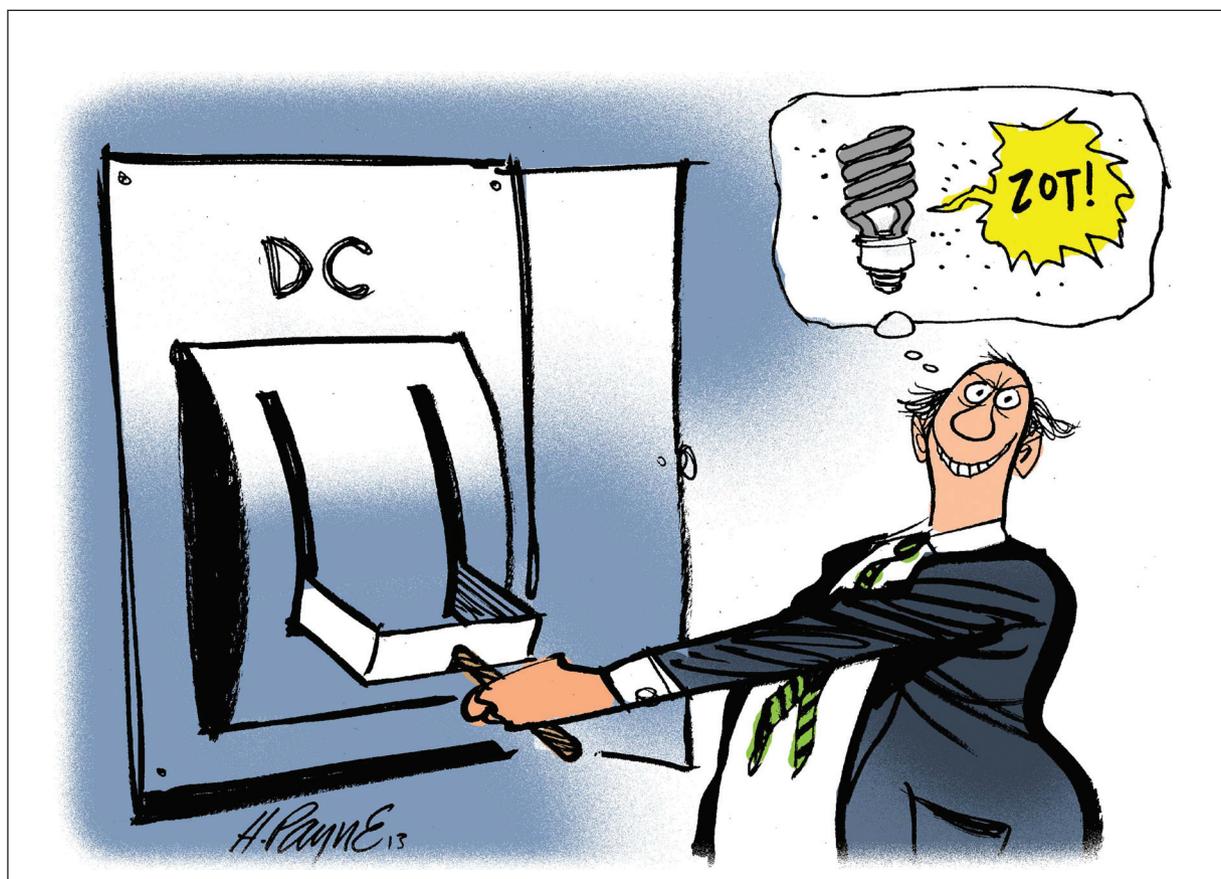


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# The Sustainable Relationship

*What the United States and the United Kingdom can teach each other about climate change and sustainable development at the national level, in six easy lessons*



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**A**s the urgency of climate change, biodiversity loss, severe poverty, and other global environmental and development challenges continues to grow, concerted international action to address them is becoming even harder. National efforts are thus more important than ever. There is still much progress to be made on the international front, especially in the stalled efforts to combat global warming. Yet as countries search for laws and policies to accelerate the transition to sustainability, they need to learn what has worked elsewhere. An important example is the United Kingdom and the United States, which have stronger ties with each other than almost any other country — the so-called “special relationship.” They share a common language and history, and have similar legal systems and culture. The United States and the United Kingdom also aspire to international leadership, and often play that role.

While many countries, including our two exemplars, have made some efforts to improve their sustainability and address issues like climate change over the past two decades or so, negative environmental trends continue and are even worsening. Thus, the December 2012 conference of the parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change emphasized the importance of “accelerating the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions.” Similarly, the report for the June 2012 U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development in

Rio de Janeiro repeatedly stated the critical need to “accelerate” progress toward sustainability.

Yet these international conferences — and their predecessors — have thus far not produced significant international commitments let alone subsequent achievements. Instead, they appear to be shifting responsibility back onto national governments. The 2009 conference of the parties to the climate convention was supposed to result in a new international agreement to reduce greenhouse gases — one that would succeed the Kyoto Protocol, which ended in 2012. Instead, it produced the Copenhagen Accord, under which individual developed countries made public pledges to reduce their greenhouse gases by a certain percentage by a particular date and individual developing countries pledged to adopt specific policies that would have the effect of reducing the growth in their greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, one of the major achievements of the 2012 Rio conference was the establishment of both official and nongovernmental online registries for “voluntary” or nonglobally negotiated commitments by individual governments and others to take particular actions toward sustainability.

Even if there was greater international cooperation, there is no other choice but to rely a great deal on national governments to accelerate progress toward sustainability, including progress on climate change. Climate change is the biggest threat to biodiversity, the international economy, and global

sustainability, and a major challenge for vulnerable populations. In 2006, a panel of the U.K. government, under the leadership of economist Nicholas Stern, published a detailed report, “The Economics of Climate Change,” that described global warming as the greatest, widest-ranging market failure ever seen. Without action, the Stern report concluded, the overall costs of climate change will be equivalent to losing at least 5 percent of annual global gross domestic product and potentially more than 20 percent. Yet, climate change must be addressed in a way that increases net jobs, builds economies, addresses inequalities, and is sustainable in the long term.

Sustainable development is a framework for integrating environmental protection and restoration into development decisions. Sustainable development is also directed at increasing human freedom, opportunity, quality of life, and well-being, and doing so fairly and justly. These, of course, are foundational values for both the United States and the United Kingdom.

Governance for sustainability — in the United States, United Kingdom, and other countries — is different from governance for other issues and purposes. It aims at a huge long-term goal — moving from the current condition to a future of sustainability. The needed reduction in greenhouse gas emissions — more than 80 percent from 1990 levels by 2050 — captures the magnitude of the challenge. In addition, the systematic integration of environment with development raises problem-solving issues with which we have relatively little experience. While much of the job of national governments is to lead, encourage, and facilitate sustainable development activities by others, governments have an important role to play.

Accelerating the transition to sustainability requires six elements at the national level. Although the United Kingdom on balance has performed better than the United States on these elements, both need to do more, and each country can learn from the successes and failures of the other.

**F**IRST, a national strategy. A sustainability strategy sets out what sustainability means to that nation, identifies key principles and priorities, sets short- and long-term goals, aligns legal and policy tools to those goals, and creates a process and timetable for achieving them.

The United Kingdom has consistently used a strategy to underpin its sustainable development program and create a framework for decision making, action, and review. However, the overall strategic objective of sustainable development has evolved over time and been a moving goal post. It began in 1994 as a trade-off between the environment and economic development, and was expanded in 1999 to include social concerns while still pursuing high economic growth as an objective. It changed again in 2005, basing sustainable development on five principles: living within environmental limits, ensuring a healthy and just society, achieving a sustainable economy, promoting good governance, and using good science responsibly. The 2005 U.K. strategy required all government departments and agencies to produce sustainable development action plans and monitor progress toward these plans.

The coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats that took power in 2010 has not produced a new strategy but instead issued a seven-page policy paper, “Mainstreaming Sustainable Development,” which acknowledges the 2005 framework but returns to a growth objective. It contains some good policy initiatives, such as “the Green Deal,” which is intended to “save energy, create jobs, and support vulnerable consumers,” but these are not aligned to any overall framework.

The 2009 Welsh strategy, by contrast, reflects the need to act urgently for sustainable development. Wales was given a substantial measure of self governance in 1998, which was increased in 2006. The Welsh strategy says: “Within the lifetime of a generation we want to see Wales using only its fair share of the earth’s resources.” Wales has even gone so far as to declare sustainable development to be the central organizing principle of government. Its action plans, indicators, and other tools are aligned to these overall objectives.

In contrast, the United States has never had a national sustainable development strategy, but is moving slowly in that direction. Congress requires the president to submit an annual report on the country’s national security strategy. Congress also requires the preparation, every four years, of the Quadrennial Defense Review that sets out “the defense strategy of the United States” as well as “a defense program for the next 20 years.” The usefulness of such long-term, multi-year reviews led the Department of Energy, in 2011, to issue its first Quadrennial Technology Review, identifying six

priority strategies to guide that agency's work in developing and deploying new energy technologies over the next five years. Congress also recently required the national security strategy and the Quadrennial Defense Review to consider the effect of climate change on Defense Department "facilities, capabilities, and missions."

**S** ECOND, legal integration mechanisms. A policy approach supported by only minimal legislation does not protect innovative and crucial procedures, institutions, and goals from electoral short-termism nor does it support leadership in sustainable development. Legislation, on the other hand, can compel adherence to best practices and promote long-term consistency.

Procedural requirements can prod government agencies to make more sustainable decisions. The United States has a long history with legally binding procedural requirements. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 requires federal agencies to prepare environmental impact statements before conducting major actions that may significantly affect the environment. This requirement has been adopted by countries around the world, and is a key tool for sustainable development.

A narrower form of integration has occurred under the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 and a related executive order. GPRA obligates federal agencies to develop and implement multi-year strategic plans that include a mission statement, goals, and objectives for major agency activities, a description of how those goals and objectives will be achieved, and an evaluation method. Of the 14 cabinet agencies and the Environmental Protection Agency, only about half identify environmental or natural resources protection, environmental stewardship, environmental responsibility, or sustainability as overall strategic goals.

But Executive Order 13514, signed by President Barack Obama in 2009, requires federal agencies to set sustainability goals for their buildings and operations, including goals for procurement, greenhouse gas reduction, energy and water use, and high performance (green) buildings. The executive order requires each agency to "develop, implement, and annually update an integrated Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan that will prioritize agency actions based on lifecycle return on investment." These plans are to be integrated into agency GPRA plans and be publicly available.

Because of the federal government's purchasing power, implementation of this executive order is moving the U.S. economy in a more sustainable direction.

In contrast, while environmental assessment is a legal requirement for some projects, programs, and plans in the United Kingdom, the procedures for government operations, policy, and lawmaking tend to be set out in guidance. Nonetheless, legislation is sometimes used to impose duties on one or more public bodies (agencies) to act in a certain way. The 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, for example, requires public bodies engaged in development planning to "function with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development." If governments interpreted sustainable development as giving greater priority to the long term, then provisions like this could provide a powerful impetus for sustainability.

Broader procedural obligations also exist in the United Kingdom. The most influential are those found in the Government of Wales Acts, the legislation that devolves power. The legislation requires Welsh government ministers to adopt a "sustainable development scheme" that sets out "how they propose, in the exercise of their functions, to promote sustainable development"; regularly issue a report assessing their effectiveness; and have the scheme independently reviewed every four years. These procedures have contributed to progress toward sustainable development in Wales, leading to expectations and cultural change that have cross-party support.

The United Kingdom has also begun to set out ambitious targets on sustainability issues in statute. The Climate Change Act of 2008 commits the country to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 34 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050, from 1990 levels. The country is using five-year carbon budgets to meet these objectives. There is no comparable law in the United States, though Congress came close in 2009 and 2010.

The United Kingdom and other members of the European Union have set a target of meeting 15 percent of their energy demand from renewable sources by 2020. (Renewables provided only 3 percent of the United Kingdom's energy in 2009.) The country is on track to meet that target, in no small part because it leads the world in offshore wind energy. Renewable energy already provides a quarter million jobs, and this could double in the years ahead. The United States has no comparable national commitment, though many states are increasing their use of renewable energy.

Somewhat similar goals can also be achieved

by administrative regulation. The United States has adopted regulations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from mobile sources under the Clean Air Act and the Energy Policy and Conservation Act. Light duty motor vehicles (cars, sport utility vehicles, minivans, and pickup trucks) are required to achieve 35.5 miles per gallon (or 250 grams of carbon dioxide per mile) by 2016 and 54.5 mpg (163 grams per mile) by 2025.

**T**HIRD, governmental implementing or coordinating bodies. Crosscutting policies like sustainable development need to be applied throughout government — to coordinate, share information, and allow joint decisionmaking.

The United Kingdom has been innovative and experimented with many such mechanisms. Several U.K. governments, including the current coalition government, have used a special cabinet committee with ministers from all or most departments to promote the integration of environment and sustainable development into policymaking and/or operations across departments. The United Kingdom has also sought to embed sustainable development by specifically allocating responsibility to individuals. The United Kingdom's most senior public servants — permanent secretaries — are personally responsible for the progress of their departments on sustainable development targets that focus on governmental operations and procurement.

An independent expert body can be invaluable. From 2000 to its demise in 2011 (ostensibly a budget cutting move), the United Kingdom's Sustainable Development Commission provided valuable support on greening operations, climate change, international relations, and production of the various national strategies. The commission gave specific and constructive advice to individual ministries on particular programs and conducted regular reviews of progress.

Institutional changes within government can also encourage integration. In 2008, the U.K. government created the Department of Energy and Climate Change to ensure that climate change and energy issues are addressed together. A government department with climate change in its name also has considerable political significance. The United States simply has a Department of Energy, with real but limited ability to address climate change.

On overall management of U.S. sustainability activities, the Office of Management and Budget plays a key role in implementing GPRA and the

executive order. Among other things, it is required to periodically post agency performance scorecards on a website. In June 2012, OMB issued its second set of scorecards, using green, yellow, and red as scores to measure agency progress. EPA and the General Services Administration scored green in all seven categories; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers scored red in all categories.

**F**OURTH, monitoring and review mechanisms. Indicators and institutions are needed to measure and report on success and failure in meeting sustainable development goals. The United Kingdom has been active in its use of sustainable development indicators, and is now developing its fourth set of such indicators. The current set employs 68 environmental, social, and economic indicators to track progress toward sustainability. A 2010 report shows improvement in about half of the indicators from 1990, including overall greenhouse gas emissions, fish stocks, economic output (with a downturn in 2008–09), and homeless households; but deterioration in aviation and shipping emissions, bird populations, employment, health inequality, community participation, and walking and bicycling.

The United States does not have sustainability indicators, but is developing a set of key national social, economic, and environmental indicators under an obscure provision of the 2010 Patient Care and Affordable Care Act, the health reform law. In addition, EPA produces an online “Report on the Environment” that tracks trends in environmental quality.

Governmental successes and failures also require outside monitoring. In the U.K. House of Commons, the Environmental Audit Committee was set up in 1998 to consider the extent to which any government activity contributes to environmental protection and sustainable development, and to audit departments' progress. Its chair is a member of the official opposition and members are backbenchers from all the key political parties, including the Green Party. The EAC has read its charge broadly, reviewing proposed budgets and individual programs for their impact on greening the economy, greening government, and climate change.

There is nothing like this committee in the U.S. Congress. Still, the Government Accountability Office, an investigative and auditing arm of Congress, has issued reports on climate change research and key indicators when requested by committees or required by law.

**F**IFTH, leadership. Studies of different countries consistently show that real progress toward sustainable development requires strong leadership from the highest levels of government. Effective leadership often means making decisions that may be unpopular in the short term but necessary in the long term. Leadership for sustainable development in both countries continues to be modest at best. Neither has fully engaged the public or the private sector on the challenges and opportunities of sustainability.

In the United States, President Obama has sought opportunities to create jobs, build the economy, and protect the environment through more stringent motor vehicle fuel economy standards, greenhouse gas regulation of some stationary sources under the Clean Air Act, and green infrastructure spending. The federal budget deficit and anti-environmental elements in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives have made that job more difficult.

In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister David Cameron promised in 2010 that his would be the “greenest government ever” even though the evidence to support this bold claim is mixed. While he regularly uses the term “sustainable,” it is in the context of a stable economy rather than one operating within the carrying capacity of the Earth. On the other hand, he has consistently allocated 0.7 percent of GDP to foreign aid — something the United States has refused to do for decades — and is working towards greening the U.K. economy.

**S**IXTH, a movement. Public support and demand for action on sustainability is needed to accelerate progress, particularly in democracies. In the United States, an emerging sustainability movement includes not only environmental groups but also many corporations, labor unions, farmers, lawyers, colleges and universities, local governments, architectural firms, religious organizations, and engineers. They have each worked out specific and practical things that can be done to move in a more sustainable direction, including not only green building certification but also corporate sustainability reporting standards, more energy-efficient products and services, and community-supported agriculture programs.

A similar movement is developing across all sectors of the United Kingdom. In 2011, the chief executives of 15 diverse nongovernmental organi-

zations (including Oxfam, Christian Aid, World Wildlife Fund, and Greenpeace) wrote an open letter accusing the coalition government of losing its way on environmental issues and the “green economy.” Major energy companies, investment firms, and a respected former Conservative party leader (Michael Heseltine) are all saying that a stronger policy framework must be put in place to support the investment necessary to meet the country’s carbon reduction goals.

What does all of this mean in terms of actual environmental performance? As might be expected, the United Kingdom ranks ahead of the United States. The 2012 Yale/Columbia Environmental Performance Index ranks the United Kingdom 9 out of 132 countries overall while the United States ranks 49. On climate change, both countries fare worse. The United Kingdom ranks 89 while the United States ranks near the bottom at 121.

The United Kingdom’s greenhouse gas emissions, which are about half of U.S. emissions on a per capita basis, have decreased more rapidly than those of the United States. The United Kingdom’s direct greenhouse gas emissions declined 23 percent between 1990 and 2010. U.S. direct greenhouse gas emissions increased 10.5 percent between 1990 and 2010, but are now at their lowest level since 1994.

Still, each country can learn from the other. If both the United States and the United Kingdom adopted some of the best practices of the other country, each would go some way toward accelerating the transition to sustainability. Both could work together more fully, using existing legal authority for international cooperation (such as section 115 of the Clean Air Act). Adoption of some of the United Kingdom’s coordinating tools and monitoring mechanisms would accelerate progress in the United States. Similarly, many of the United Kingdom’s policy tools would be more robust and effective if they had the legal backing offered in the United States.

Yet both countries’ efforts are modest in proportion to the challenges and opportunities of sustainability. Both would benefit from an overall national strategy that acknowledges the need to act urgently on climate change and accelerate progress toward sustainability. And both would benefit from a serious effort to engage the public and all nongovernmental stakeholders. These and other actions are required by their foundational values — human opportunity, well-being, and justice — and their claim to international leadership. Sustainability and climate change are, after all, the defining issues of our time. •