NPG Booknote

Population and the PCSD

The President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD)
Sustainable America. A New Consensus.
U.S. Government Printing Office, February 1996, 186 pp.
To order: 202-783-3238.

Reviewed by Lindsey Grant

The PCSD has completed

its report on sustainability in America, to almost total press and public silence, and so quietly that it took multiple 'phone calls to the White House to find anybody who knew what it was.

The PCSD came into being on June 14, 1993, by Presidential order. The Council's path was not easy. The President's message charged it with helping to "grow the economy and preserve the environment...", objectives that are likely to conflict. The 29 Council members were balanced to include industrialists, labor, environmentalists, Cabinet members and critics, and a mix by sex, race and ethnicity; and it undertook to proceed by consensus, which usually leads to harmless generalities. It had no real authority or role in decision making, and such impermanent bodies have neither time nor authority to carry their ideas through. At first, population and consumption – key issues in sustainability – were not even in its scope. They were introduced, over opposition, at the insistance of Council member and Undersecretary of State Timothy Wirth.

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Nevertheless, the PCSD's report deserves a footnote in the history of U.S. Government population policy. It, and the President's acceptance of it, were the nearest thing on record to an official U.S. endorsement of the proposition that U.S. population should stop growing. President Nixon raised the issue in 1969, but in 1972 did not endorse the Rockefeller Commission report that explicitly stated the case for stabilization. The CEQ/State Department *Global Future: Time to Act* of January 1981 said the country should "develop a national population policy which addresses the issues of...population stabilization..." but did not say flatly that we must stabilize, and President Carter, in his last days of office, probably did not see it.

The PCSD report contains seven chapters, sixteen principles, and ten goals, each of which in turn is identified by several "Indicators of Progress". Moreover, six of the chapters each have several of their own "Policy Recommendations" and/or "Actions". It is a bit confusing.

There are chapters on Building a New Framework, Information and Education, Strengthening Communities, Natural Resources Stewardship, U.S. Population and Sustainability, and International Leadership. I will focus on the population section, noting only that there are many good if generalized homilies in the other sections about cooperating for the common good and promoting environmentally benign policies.

As to population: principle 12 said that "The United States should have policies and programs that contribute to stabilizing global human population...." On the other hand, principle 1 said that "some things must grow – jobs, productivity, wages, capital and savings, profits...", and principle 14 called for a growing economy. More workers with higher productivity are likely to stress the environment even more – even with efforts at amelioration – and growth itself is at some point unsustainable. Not surprisingly, the report did not explore in depth what sustainability really is.

Goal 8 was specific: "Move towards stabilization of U.S. population." Chapter 6 took the steam out of this resolution. There were good if cautious sugges-

tions for making family planning available to all – and a sharp reminder that Title X family planning services have declined 70% since 1980 in real dollars. There were the obligatory proposals to promote the status of women. On the gritty issues, however, the Council punted. It adopted the compromise formula from the 1972 UN Bucharest population conference that parents should "decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children...." Neither Bucharest nor the Council offered guidance as to what is "responsible" or how that would lead to a stable population. (Incidentally, it avoided the abortion issue.)

Even such a diverse group can recognize the need to stop population growth. They were not alone in their inability to face the tough decisions that would be needed to do it.

On immigration, the Council simply emphasized the delicacy of the issue and the need for fairness to everybody. It called attention to the work of the Commission on Immigration Reform (the "Jordan Commission") but did not endorse its proposals. It made the familiar proposal that the U.S. should "address the factors that encourage people to leave their home countries", but did not try to show how the United States somehow can end world poverty or political oppression.

The report was submitted to the President on March 7th, and he "was pleased...to accept it...." He asked the Council to continue its work until December. He assigned followup to the Vice President, who in turn delegated to the Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) the task of exploring what recommendations can be put into effect, and he proposed a joint federal / city / county (but not state) Joint Center on Sustainable Communities.

A much reduced staff will carry on "phase two", and the Council is expected to meet twice, perhaps once in May to approve the followup and again in October to review progress. CEQ's thinking is still in flux, but it apparently is under instructions to create an Interagency Working Group on Sustainable Development reporting to the Vice President.

The Susquehanna River, they say, is "a mile wide and an inch deep." That seems to be true of the Council's enthusiasm for the population position it endorsed. The Council included the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, Interior, the Deputy Secretaries of Agriculture and Education, Under Secretaries from State and Commerce, and the Administrator of EPA (all participating "as individuals"). The Council published its report just as both houses of Congress were debating legislation on immigration, which is the critical determinant of whether U.S. population growth will stop. The Clinton administration, after much vacillation, undercut the effort to reduce legal immigration. If that impressive collection of administration leaders was really interested in the population issue, they could perhaps have influenced the administration's position or at least called public attention to the connection between their report and what was going on in Congress.

The CEQ has since its inception been peripheral to the Washington decision process, and it is hard to be sanguine as to what will result from this little known effort. Let me say in its behalf, however, that the PCSD showed that even such a diverse group can recognize the need to stop population growth. They were not alone in their inability to face the tough decisions that would be needed to do it.

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