

## Sustainability, Part II

# A Proposal to Foundations

by Lindsey Grant

*The nation grows, but public and political interest in the consequences is close to negligible. That inattention makes the issue more, not less, important. What is here proposed is the use of a systematic foresight process – a “Sustainability Project” – to bring population growth back into the national debate by publicizing the consequences of ignoring it.*

Football heroes and TV stars have little trouble getting their opinions heard, but serious discussion of serious issues is usually not self-supporting in this distracted and media-hyped society. For better or worse, it is subsidized by universities, corporations or the government. At least two of those three sources are not usually inclined to take adventurous positions on public issues.

The non-profit sector is a key player in promoting perspectives that may not accord with the conventional wisdom. Private foundations dispense millions of dollars annually. Several of them, through their assistance to non-governmental study or advocacy groups, have been critically important in getting a hearing for major issues such as the role of demography in shaping our future. Without that support, those who are not otherwise subsidized could not have afforded to spend their time on those issues.

Without sustained pressure from advocacy groups, our lawmakers' attention turns to other, more immediate and perhaps less difficult matters. The issue of population growth, worldwide and in the United States, became a matter of widespread public concern in the late 'sixties but soon became “stale news.”

That decline was hastened, in the case of U.S. population growth, by the dawning recognition that there are only two accessible variables driving our demographic future: fertility, and migration. U.S. fertility dropped dramatically in the 'seventies, remaining above replacement level only for the poor, the un-

educated and particularly the minorities. To suggest the need for further decline thus came to be seen by many idealists as veiled elitism or racism. At the same time, immigration was growing rapidly and has become the driving force in U.S. population growth, but many of those same people see any proposal to limit immigration as xenophobia.

---

***The population community is preaching to the choir, without enlisting the sort of coalition that will be needed if the country is to change its present demographic behavior.***

---

Population restraint is central to achieving long term environmental sustainability, but those charges frightened away people who should be proponents of a population policy. In the face of those fears, demographic arguments are rejected by many environmentalists, valid as the arguments may be. The politicians follow suit. Witness the complete silence about population in the recent election campaigns and the almost total silence about the demographic consequences when Congress debated and gutted the immigration reforms proposed in early 1996.

The population community is preaching to the choir, without enlisting the sort of coalition that will be needed if the country is to change its present demographic behavior. Polls show that the public is concerned about U.S. population growth, but that concern is not being focused and brought to bear on the politicians.

---



We are not getting to those who are most fertile or – more important – to those who make policy. If we cannot reach them by simply reiterating the population arguments, perhaps it is time to take another tack: persuade them that there will be disastrous consequences for the things they hold important, if they don't address population growth. Make the appeal, not as an abstraction, but by showing what will happen to their interests. Enlist the rich in the preservation (or restoration) of social tranquillity, the urbanite in the avoidance of urban disintegration, the middle class in the preservation of a decent standard of living, the poor in the hope of finding a job and a role in society, and the environmentalist in the pursuit of sustainability.

Enter foresight.

## Foresight

One can hardly expect the politicians to get much ahead of political realities, as they see them. If we cannot convert them immediately into advocates of demographic restraint, perhaps we can eventually convert them by asking, in the context of one policy decision after another: "What are the consequences of the proposed policy?"

This process is usually referred to as "foresight." It is not simply a concept. It requires institutional machinery to provide a systematic multidisciplinary evaluation of the probable consequences of trends or of anticipated actions. It needs

- an organizational structure to bring disciplines together,
- an ongoing review of environmental, social and demographic trends and their probable consequences, and
- perhaps most important, a means of bringing those conclusions to bear in the decision process.

It is, in other words, a dedicated "think tank" located at the key intersection of decision making in government. If government will not create such a mechanism (which so far it has not), perhaps the non-profit sector can. I will come back to that point.

## The Stalled Decision Process

These ideas are far from new. Various governmental and private initiatives have been directed toward identifying the issues that confront us. There have even been ephemeral efforts to create a systematic foresight process to inform national decisions, but they have foundered on bureaucratic resistance to change, the lack of a public consensus on the need for action, and simple inertia.

Let me briefly survey recent government foresight projects.

**The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA).** Anybody interested in sustainability should reread NEPA. It begins with these eloquent words:

*The purposes of this Act are: To declare a national policy which will encourage a productive and enjoyable harmony between man and his environment; to promote efforts which will prevent or eliminate damage to the environment and biosphere and stimulate the health and welfare of man; to enrich the understanding of the ecological systems and natural resources important to the Nation; ....*

*The Congress, recognizing the profound impact of man's activity on the ... natural environment, particularly the profound influences of population growth, high density urbanization, industrial expansion, resource exploitation, and new and expanding technological advances ... declares that it is the continuing policy of the Federal Government ... to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans.*

- a beautiful statement of the idea of sustainability, before the word itself came into use.

The Act then goes on to spell out a process – the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) – to enable the government to examine proposed governmental actions to see whether they meet those goals.

The Act does not tell the government what it can or cannot do. It was conceived as a "process bill." It tells the government that it must con-



sider the potential environmental consequences of proposed actions, and it provides for public participation. The problem is that the law has been used for limited projects such as interstate highway intersections but never really applied to major national decisions.

Anybody who wishes to bring long term goals back into the national dialogue could hardly find a better place to start than demanding that NEPA be followed. Ignored though it is, it is still the law of the land.

**The Rockefeller Commission** (the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, chaired by John D. Rockefeller III) was created at about the same time by President Nixon and Congress. (see *NPG Forum* paper "Sustainability, Part I"). It concluded in 1972 that further population growth would do more harm than good, and it offered suggestions as to how to stop that growth. It was too controversial for the time. The President did not accept it, and it is largely forgotten. It deserves better. The recommendations would be a good starting place even now for organizations seeking to make realistic proposals as to how to address the U.S. future.

---

***Back in 1972, the Rockefeller Commission concluded that further population growth would do more harm than good, and it offered suggestions as to how to stop that growth.***

---

**The Global 2000 Report** to President Carter in 1980 had two broad purposes:

(1) to present an integrated description of major world trends in resources and the environment and to relate them to population growth; and

(2) to evaluate the capability of the U.S. Government to conduct such integrated foresight on an ongoing basis. In a three-volume report, it warned of the dangers posed by current trends. It stated flatly that the government does not have the capability to make integrated cross-sectoral analyses. That was 1980, and it is still true.

**Global Future: Time to Act.** The Global 2000 Report offered no recommendations, but it was followed up in January 1981 at the very

close of the Carter administration by a booklet of action proposals from the U.S. Department of State and the Council on Environmental Quality which included eight broad recommendations concerning U.S. population growth: "*The United States should develop a national population policy which addresses the issues of:*

- *Population stabilization*
- *Availability of family planning programs*
- *Rural and urban migration issues*
- *Public education on population concerns*
- *Just, consistent, and workable immigration laws*
- *The role of the private sector – nonprofit, academic and business*
- *Improved information needs and capacity to analyze impacts of population growth within the United States*
- *Institutional arrangements to ensure continued federal attention to domestic population issues.*"

Those last two proposals were expanded into extensive recommendations for foresight machinery, including a proposal for a "Global Population, Resources and Environmental Analysis Institute, a hybrid public-private institution ...."

The proposal for foresight machinery was unanimously endorsed in December 1981 by the non-governmental Global Tomorrow Coalition (GTC), which included all the major environmental and population groups. (GTC itself was never able to make such a clear recommendation again, and it was dissolved in 1995; this is a warning that large coalitions tend to lose focus.)

**The Global Issues Working Group (GIWG).** The Global 2000 Report generated widespread public interest. The Reagan administration responded by instructing Chairman Alan Hill of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to create an interagency group to "identify global environmental and resource issues of national concern, and recommend appropriate government action. ... and to improve the U.S. national capability to gather information and to forecast future trends."

The GIWG had a short and dispiriting history. Chairman Hill seemed genuinely enthusiastic, but he was reined in by more powerful



players in the White House Cabinet Council. The GIWG lost its all-important bureaucratic “clout”; it was ignored by the powerful and it became mired in inter-agency disagreements over proposed papers. Launched in 1982, it generated one harmless statement of “Global Environmental Principles” and two position papers for minor international conferences before it simply went dormant about 1985.

The moral is that the pursuit of foresight is doomed unless there are powerful advocates at the top. The CEQ, technically part of the White House, has never had that sort of power. Somehow, the President and his top advisers need to become convinced that this is a process they cannot ignore.

**The House Committee on Energy and Commerce Oversight Subcommittee** in May 1982 held hearings on various foresight proposals. They were summarized in a Congressional Research Service report, but nothing else happened.

**The Critical Trends Assessment Act.** During the '80s, Representative and then Senator Gore repeatedly introduced variants of a bill to create a foresight process within the White House. He did not press it, and the bill got as far as committee hearings only once. Three Senate committees on April 30, 1985, held a Joint Hearing on the whole issue of foresight. Senator Gore presented his bill, but the committees took no further action. (That bill could still be used as the basis for foresight legislation, perhaps as a way of giving force to NEPA. See below.)

**Blueprint for the Environment.** During the 1988 presidential campaign, a coalition of 18 major environmental organizations prepared a “Blueprint for the Environment” for the guidance of the incoming U.S. administration. Among dozens of recommendations on environmental issues, the Blueprint said that “U.S. population pressures threaten the environment all across our nation,” and gave some examples. It said that family planning and the availability of contraceptives must be expanded worldwide. It recommended “an official population policy for the United States” and said that “We must assure that federal policies and programs promote a balance between population, resources,

and environmental quality.” It went on to propose better decision machinery in the government and a government-wide foresight process reporting directly to the White House Chief of Staff.

Nothing happened. What is perhaps worse, the environmental organizations that sponsored the Blueprint have, with one exception, subsequently avoided addressing the two things that drive population growth: immigration and fertility. One did not expect a strong environmental position from President Bush, but the timidity of the environmental organizations themselves is a shocking reminder how far the nation is from a population policy.<sup>1</sup>

**The President’s Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD).** Like President Reagan and the GIWG (above), President Clinton saw that “sustainability” had a constituency; on June 14, 1993, he created the PCSD. Its mandate was equivocal from the start. The President charged it with helping to “grow the economy and preserve the environment ...,” objectives that may be expected to conflict. It was a mixed body with members from the Cabinet, environmentalists, labor leaders, industrialists and a mix by sex, race and ethnicity. Population and consumption – two of the critical elements of sustainability – were initially not even in its scope. They were introduced, over opposition, at the instance of Council member and Undersecretary of State Timothy Wirth.

---

***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.***

---

To its credit, the Council, in its report presented in March 1996, called for a “Move toward stabilization of U.S. population” (Goal 8) and said that “The United States should have policies and programs that contribute to stabilizing global human population ...” (Principle 12). It remained equivocal, however, as to the broader issue of growth itself. “... some things must grow – jobs, productivity, wages, capital and savings, profits ...” It did not address the



likelihood that more workers with higher productivity are likely to increase environmental stress, even with efforts at amelioration, and that growth itself is at some point unsustainable. It did not, in other words, explore what sustainability really is. It avoided the problem of how to stabilize population, by leaving fertility up to “responsible” individual decisions and avoiding positions on abortion or on immigration levels.

The President was “pleased ... to accept” the report.<sup>2</sup> This is a small footnote to history. The report and the President’s acceptance of it, casual as it was, constitute the first explicit acceptance by a President of the proposition that U.S. population should stop growing. Let it be said in its behalf that the Council 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. (The PCSD, in truncated form, has been extended through 1998, with a mandate to collaborate with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in sketching out a “new environmental management system for the 21st Century”, to address the climate issue, work on developing “sustainable metropolitan communities” and participate in “relevant” U.S. international delegations – but not to work further on the population issue.)

Presidents, one might conclude, prefer the appearance of action on sustainability to the substance – unless, perhaps, they are forced by sustained pressure and an aroused public.

**The Science Advisory Board of EPA** in January 1995 issued a set of recommendations titled *Beyond the Horizon: Using Foresight to Protect the Environmental Future* (EPA-SAB-EC-95-007). It started with the recommendations that

*As much attention should be given to avoiding future environmental problems as to controlling current ones. ... EPA should establish an early-warning system to identify potential future environmental risks.*

First among the “forces of change” they listed was “*The continuing growth in human populations, and the concentration of growing populations in large urban areas ...*”.

Nothing, so far, has come of the Advisory Board’s recommendation.

A principal lesson to be learned from this gloomy recital is that temporary groups or projects cannot move the nation on issues so vast and complicated as these. Moreover, none of the projects had a specific “peg” – a current issue or pending decision to which they were relevant and which forced their conclusions into policy making.<sup>3</sup> A report published in a vacuum tends to disappear, particularly if it calls for difficult actions.

## Mobilizing For Action

Those initiatives have come and gone without perceptibly affecting national decisions. Let us ask whether some other approach might fare better.

Several private foundations have been attempting with limited success to make population growth into a national issue. I would propose a new and central focus for their approach: that they consider creating and supporting a long-term, systematic foresight process outside of government. It would call attention to the demographic consequences of proposed actions and warn of the effects of population growth on those proposed policies. It would, in effect, be a “think tank” that would inform national decision-making on a continuing basis. Most of its effort would be given to the analysis of current governmental policies and legislative proposals.

The project should probably hook into the environmental community’s current enthusiasm for “sustainability”. It is a popular idea (see *Forum* paper “Sustainability, Part I”). It is a good one-word summary of the goals of environmentalism. It permits a somewhat broader focus and is probably a better slogan for mobilizing people than the words “population policy”.

As a convenient shorthand, I will refer to my proposal as the “Sustainability Project.”

**Why a Private Initiative Is Needed.** In the face of governmental inaction, the situation cries out for such a project: a permanent, small, like-minded group of people with sufficient funding to call upon experts and assemble them to exercise the foresight function.



It would be, in effect, a continuing private foresight institute to hold the government's feet to the fire, to point out the consequences for sustainability of

- current trends,
- proposed governmental initiatives, or
- legislative proposals,

and to point the way toward sustainable policies.

Praise for "sustainability" is worthless unless it is translated into policy when new initiatives are afoot. Speeches aside, Congress and the Administration do not address "sustainability" directly. Rather, it is advanced or set back by policies or legislation that are ostensibly directed toward quite different ends: welfare; health; employment; trade; land use; agricultural price supports and the Conservation Reserve Program; immigration regulation; budgetary decisions. Decisions in those areas are likely to affect the rate of resource use, the environment, or immigration, fertility and U.S. population growth. Most of those issues, and many others, will come up for decisions in the next several years. There must be a way of showing how each of them affects our future.

Such a project should be focused on the United States. One issue might indeed be the level of U.S. support for third world population or environmental programs – in their interest and ours – but anodyne generalizations about other people's problems are a popular way to avoid our own. Sustainability is unachievable unless we focus on our own future.

There are of course other think tanks addressing one aspect or another of sustainability, but

- they almost never address the population aspects;
- they tend to be focused on one issue (e.g. energy, or mineral resources, or forests) rather than on the cross-disciplinary character of what we are doing to our society and the environment; and
- they tend to have their own schedules and priorities, rather than engaging in true foresight – identifying the cross-sectoral implications of decisions currently contemplated.

**What the Project Would Be.** It would consist of an ongoing secretariat directed by a small

governing group. It could be a new organization or perhaps be attached to an existing environmental or resource group if one can be found sufficiently courageous to sponsor a project that might be highly controversial. If so, the project would still take its directions from its own governing board, not from the larger organization.

---

***Anodyne generalizations about other people's problems are a popular way to avoid our own. Sustainability is unachievable unless we focus on our own country's future.***

---

It should not be a broad membership organization, because servicing a national membership can be a distraction from the pursuit of focused policies. It would be an action group dedicated to the proposition of sustainability, not a debating club. There is no shortage of debates, elsewhere. It will need to hammer away at its agenda: how does a proposed action affect demographic growth? with what consequences? how does population growth affect the prospects of success for a particular policy? Simply stating the need for sustainability is not enough.

It would enlist academics from various disciplines, either in-house or on a cooperative basis with universities and research centers. They would be organized to interact and thus provide the interdisciplinary input that is the soul of foresight. Cooperatively, they would produce papers targeted to specific issues and longer periodic analyses.

This arrangement would have valuable by-products. Those academics would themselves become familiar with interdisciplinary research and might indeed promote it. If they passed that knowledge and enthusiasm on to their students, it might help to build a new generation of leadership that is less afflicted than the present one with tunnel vision. Academics concerned about present cross-sectoral trends would be introduced to the press and the general public and would get a better hearing for their views.

**What It Would Do.** One can envisage several productive areas of activity.

- *Briefing Papers.* The most immediate product would be targeted papers discussing the



likely consequences of specific trends and proposed policies. The Project would need to promote and market those analyses, bringing them particularly to the attention of the media and to the congressional or executive offices involved.

■ *Polls.* The public is in many respects ahead of its “leaders” – who may be responding to money or power more than to public opinion. This is certainly true of the immigration issue, where the public sees the impact of high immigration levels on its own well-being, but Congress does not respond. If that public feeling is identified and mobilized, Congress cannot ignore it so easily.

■ *News Conferences* are a natural vehicle to mobilize the media, to call attention to the Project’s studies and polls, or to publicize more ambitious projects such as those below.

■ *Periodic “State of the Nation Reports.”* Perhaps in time, as the experts develop their interactive capabilities, there could be periodic private “Global 2000 Reports” (briefer than the original, and centered on the demographic connections) assessing where the nation is heading and showing the interaction of trends and how they influence the pursuit of national goals. In this as in its other work, the Project would presumably couch its conclusions in the language of education, not of advocacy.

■ *The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA).* The law is not being enforced, because it gets in the way of decision makers. Congress from the beginning exempted its own activities from NEPA. While the strict application of the EIS process, as it has evolved, would have to be modified to deal with Presidential decision making, a determined private group might be able to force the application of NEPA to national decisions. That in itself would be a long step toward institutionalizing the pursuit of sustainability. Environmental organizations have used NEPA and the courts to force their viewpoint into more limited decisions; it is high time to make more ambitious use of the Act.

■ *Governmental Foresight.* There may be a singular opportunity in the next few years to promote better foresight and more sustainable policies within the government. I have described the Critical Trends Assessment Act which

Representative/Senator Al Gore proposed to Congress from time to time but never pressed. As Vice President he has been silent on it. However, he understands the need for foresight and has educated himself in the issue. To be of real use in influencing policy, the office he proposed should be placed more directly in the line of authority than it is in his bill, but that flaw can be remedied. The remarkable thing about that bill – and the reason that the opportunity exists – is that Newt Gingrich sponsored it in the House when Gore sponsored it in the Senate. Here is a wonderful chance for productive bipartisan statesmanship. The Sustainability Project could urge that that bill be revived and passed.

---

***The Critical Trends Assessment Act bill was sponsored by Al Gore in the Senate – and by Newt Gingrich in the House.***

---

■ *“The Coalition for Sustainability”.* It might be useful for the Project to organize the most diverse possible coalition to popularize the concept of sustainability, as coalitions have done for the environment. It should go beyond statements about the social interest. Most people must be convinced of the importance of sustainability in advancing their own interests. Otherwise, immediate individual interest overrides long term social interest, and sustainability remains a platitude while the nation undermines it.

Such a coalition could support demands for improved foresight capability in government. It might take positions on specific legislation. It could support a general educational campaign on sustainability.

**What to Avoid.** The Project should not lose its identity in any such coalition. Indeed, there might be different coalitions, most of them transient, on specific issues. The history of environmental coalitions (including the Global Tomorrow Coalition cited above) suggests that coalitions function best when they are pulled together more or less briefly to achieve specific legislative or policy goals.

If the Project does not keep its own identity, it runs the danger of being coopted by those with other agendas such as feminist goals or social justice. Such agendas may be valid in them-



selves and potentially they could make a contribution to sustainability, but those advocates have already shown themselves capable of coopting the population movement. Sustainability will not get very far if the Project is diverted from its central issue.

There is another reason for my advice to create coalitions but not lose oneself in them: the demonstrated reluctance of U.S. environmental groups to take on the causes of population growth. High immigration and differential fertility are two of the most controversial topics in the United States, but they are precisely the ones that must be addressed if our future population size is to be the product of the national will rather than accident. It would be a calamity for the population cause if the Sustainability Project were held hostage by its "allies" and reduced to silence on the most important decisions.

---

***Sustainability will not get very far if the Project is diverted from its central issue.***

---

**This does not exhaust the possibilities.** I have emphasized that a population policy is central to the achievement of sustainability, but the "Sustainability Project" might well trade its support for other projects in exchange for support on population issues. For a few examples: it could endorse environmentally sound building techniques, or benign industrial processes, or better waste handling (the nation produces far more tons of waste each year than economic goods), or more stringent rules on recycling.

There might be room for cooperating with groups at the state and local levels of decision-making, but I have yet to figure this possibility out.

"Sustainability", properly used, is an exciting idea. It can be the vehicle for moving the United States away from unthinking reliance on laissez-faire – which presently is driving the country in dangerous directions – toward a systematic way of recognizing our obligations to future generations, establishing our social goals, understanding how they relate to each other, and successfully pursuing them.

## Notes

1. For a full description of this failure, see my *NPG Forum* paper "The Timid Crusade" (Washington, DC: Negative Population Growth, Inc., 1994.) Since then (in 1996), the Sierra Club has moved farther from a population policy by passing a formal Board resolution that it will not address immigration. The Wilderness Society, on the other hand, has adopted a resolution taking note of the adverse impact of Immigration on its goals.

2. Summaries of the Council's work are available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/PCSD>. Full texts of its reports and those of its task forces are available at <http://www.sustainable.doe.gov>. See also *NPG Booknote* "Population and the PCSD" (Washington, DC: Negative Population Growth, Inc., April 1996). *NPG Forum* articles, *Footnotes* and *Booknotes* are available from NPG, and full texts are carried on its Internet site: <http://www.npg.org>.

3. A detailed look at foresight proposals through 1987 is available in my *Foresight and National Decisions: the Horseman and the Bureaucrat* (University Press of America, 1988; available at the World Future Society bookstore, Bethesda, MD; 800-989-8274.)

**About the author** Lindsey Grant is a writer and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Population and Environment. His books include *Juggernaut: Growth on a Finite Planet*, *How Many Americans?*, *Elephants in the Volkswagen*, and *Foresight and National Decisions: the Horseman and the Bureaucrat*.

**NPG Forums** are articles about population, immigration, natural resources, and the environment. We also publish:

**NPG Booknotes**, reviews of books we believe deserve our members' attention;

**NPG Footnotes**, shorter articles on topical issues; and

**NPG Position Papers**.

© 1997 by NPG, Inc. Permission to reprint is granted in advance. Please acknowledge source and author, and notify NPG.

The views expressed by the author do not necessarily represent the views of NPG.

NPG is a national membership organization founded in 1972. Annual dues are \$30 and are tax deductible to the extent the law allows. Please write or call for a list of available publications.



Negative Population Growth, Inc.

PO Box 1206 Teaneck, NJ 07666

Voice (201) 837-3555 Fax (201) 837-0288

1666 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 420 Washington, DC 20009

Voice (202) 667-8950 Fax (202) 667-8953

E-mail [npg@npg.org](mailto:npg@npg.org) Website [www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org)